CICELY IN CEYLON

Prince John of Streplitz.

By MAJOR F. A. SYMONS.

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BY

MAJOR F. A. SYMONS
(AUTHOR OF "PRINCE JOHN OF STREPLITZ")

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CICELY IN CEYLON

CHAPTER I

Desmond Cleeve braced himself against the small hurricane which swept the decks of the P. and O. steamship "Scudan," and thanked his stars that at least sea-sickness was not one of his vices. The great rollers, born amidst the untrammelled expanse of the Atlantic ocean, swept down upon the vessel's quarter with a force of apparent annihilation. Now and again, shivering as if with ague, the wretched ship thrust her nose into an abysmal trough, and the screw, rising heavenwards, raced impotently.

With a well-calculated dash across the deck Desmond flung himself at the door of the smoking room. In another moment, the door, caught by the wind, closed behind him amidst a shower of spindrift that half-swamped the cabin.

"Bit thick outside, isn't it?"

Desmond, shaking the moisture from his face, glanced across at the speaker. The latter, the only other occupant of the cabin, was wedged in between a cushioned corner and a marble-topped table, his long legs affording an efficient prop for preventing him from being thrown across the deck. It was a cheery voice, and the owner of it, brown-eyed, with dark brown hair and small moustache, bore out its character in every line of his smiling face.

"By Jove, yes!" answered Desmond "It took me all my time to get here from the saloon. You

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and I appear to be the only two passengers still alive on the ship."

"Looks like it, certainly," cried the other, yawning. "Don't suppose there is any use in ringing for the steward, or we might celebrate the occasion by a drink—What do you think? This old Bay of Biscay is a terror when she is roused, isn't she? Ever been through before?"

"No, never. And I expect my sister is wishing that she may never be through again," replied Desmond.

"Well, this is my first trip East also, so there is another bond of union. We really must have that drink."

As he spoke, he pressed the electric button, and, uncurling his legs for an instant from the iron support of the table, made room for Desmond on the seat beside him.

"Permit me to introduce myself," continued he, his large mouth breaking into a humorous curl. "Jack Mallory, at your service—a captain in the West Cork Militia for four weeks of the year, and a budding globe-trotter for the present."

"Ah, my name is Cleeve—Desmond Cleeve—also a globe-trotter."

"At the instigation of a respected paternal relative, I propose encircling the globe in search of knowledge," added Mallory. "According to my father, the intellectual attainments of the Militia are insufficient for the full mental development of a treasured son. Under tropical suns my mind will absorb instinctively what three years at Oxford failed to provide."

The merry twinkle in Mallory's eyes and the soft

intonation of voice, tinged as it was by the merest suspicion of a brogue, appealed to Desmond's sense of humour and natural love of companionship. This tall, lithe, young man of twenty-three, or thereabouts, bid fair to prove an excellent fellow traveller. Desmond, himself of Irish descent on his mother's side, was never slow to meet the hand of fellowship half-way. He liked this frank young man, and he didn't object to shewing it.

"Well, I hope we may become better acquainted before we finish," said Desmond. "My sister and I are also bent upon seeing a little of the world. I don't think we are likely to go beyond Ceylon, but even that is something to people who have never been farther than France. My sister, and a girl she is chaperoning, are with me. I occupy the position of courier. I am afraid that I cannot offer to introduce you to them at present, as sea-sickness holds them in absolute collapse in their cabin."

"Beastly thing, sea-sickness!" grunted Mallory. "Hope they will soon be better, I'm sure. Ah, here's the steward at last. What is it to be?"

"Whisky, thanks!"

"Split whisky and soda, steward; and look here, how much longer will it take us to get out of this confounded bay?"

"About another twelve hours, sir," answered the steward, hanging on to a stanchion. "That is, if she doesn't break her blooming propeller, sir."

"Humph! Why did I sell my farm and go to sea?" cried Mallory facetiously. "Well, let us drink while we may, anyway, so hurry up with that whisky. If you can't walk, crawl!"

Desmond look at his watch. It was rapidly

growing dusk. The night, with its prospect of sleep, would be easier for his charges to bear than the everlasting monotony of the daylight hours of helpless sickness. So long as this storm lasted there was no hope for either of the girls. It was a bad start, but a storm was better, perhaps, before than after a calm. As for a moment he watched, through a porthole, the rising and falling of the green seas, a ray of sunshine penetrated the clouds, flooding the cabin for an instant, as if the bearer of some heavenly message. His thoughts flew backwards to the old manor house which they had left but three days before, and a sadness filled his eyes. Above all things he wished this to prove a happy journey from beginning to end. Since the death of their father, six months before, he and his sister, Margaret, were the sole remaining members of the family. The strain of nursing her father through a long and fatal illness had so told upon Margaret that Desmond had clutched with avidity at the suggestion of a voyage to Ceylon. To bring happiness into the eyes of Margaret was at present his one ambition. That Gerald Gordon whom he had not seen since his college days, ten years before, should so opportunely invite him to pay him a winter visit to Ceylon seemed providential.

Gordon was a bachelor, but, according to his own statements, he possessed a large planter's bungalow capable of accommodating a dozen visitors. He had never met Margaret Cleeve, but seemed delighted that Desmond would not come without her. In fact, no sooner had the arrangements for the journey been completed, than a lengthy cablegram had asked Miss Desmond to chaperon Gordon's young niece, Cicely Rosmead.

Cicely was a complete stranger to Margaret Cleeve, but any misgivings that the latter may have at first formulated were, once and for all, swept away when the latter met Cicely a week before their departure. The large, dark-blue eyes of the younger girl presented depths of sympathetic beauty which the saddened Margaret could not resist. The enthusiastic voice of Cicely as she thanked Margaret Cleeve for her kindness in taking her on such an enchanting journey, had won the kindly heart of the latter in an instant.

Cicely's mother was Gerald Gordon's sister. The girl, ever since she had left school, two years before, had been promised that, some day, she should visit her uncle. She had looked forward to an Eastern voyage as to a visit to some land of the Arabian Nights. The suddenness of its fulfilment had thrown her into a state of delight that even the subsequent tortures of the Bay of Biscay could not quench.

Desmond's sadness changed to a smile of pleasure as a picture of Cicely Rosmead's laughing eyes rose up before him. He was heartily glad that his sister had been given such a delightful companion, whose happy laughter dispersed shadows like a ray of sunshine.

His soliloquy was suddenly interrupted by the advent of the steward, who, with one leg twisted round a table leg, swayed about like a dying teetotum.

"How is she heading now, steward?" cried Mallory cheerily.

"First officer says she is running out of the heavy sea, sir. We shall be all right by morning, I expect. Say when, sir!"

Mallory swallowed a mouthful of whisky and soda,

and glanced with a meditative smile at the rapidly-darkening port-hole.

"King Solomon said that two of the most wonderful things in the world are the flight of an eagle and the ways of a man with a maid. He could as conscientiously have added—and the ways of the Bay of Biscay. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, I quite think so," answered Desmond, laughing. "But if he had said 'the ways of a maid with a man,' instead of the other way about, I am not sure that I would even back the Bay of Biscay."

"Humph! Nor I! Have you found that out too?"

"What?"

"Why, the devilishness of the ways of a maid."

"No, I don't know that I have," replied Desmond. "I don't think I am particularly susceptible to feminine wiles."

Jack Mallory groaned tragically, but the next moment his eyes glittered with mirth.

"I wish to heavens I wasn't," he cried.

CHAPTER II

THE next morning, as the steward had predicted, brought with it so complete a change of weather that the deck, even before breakfast, assumed an actual air of gaiety. The sun shone brightly from a sky of cobalt, flecked here and there by the mere remnants of fleecy clouds. The coast of Portugal seemed very near as the ship steamed past its rock-bound headlands. A long, lazy swell still rolled shorewards from the open sea, but even this was momentarily lessening. Gibraltar would soon be reached. The Mediterranean, with its azure water and cloudless skies, would, within a day or two, become a reality instead of only an impression obtained by reading travellers' tales. The very East itself, with all that imagination promised, seemed to those whose thoughts so eagerly flew apace, actually within their grasp.

Jack Mallory, smoking a matutinal cigarette, leaned against the leeward rail, waiting for the first sound of the breakfast bell. He scanned the various passengers with special interest. Before leaving Tilbury he had seen Desmond Cleeve with two ladies, and his susceptible gaze had not failed to notice their attractiveness. Desmond's offer of an introduction had whetted his appetite amazingly. He could hardly hope to see them so soon on deck, but they must surely be well enough to appear in an hour or two. Presently, seeing Desmond emerge from the saloon, he impulsively dived across the deck in pursuit.

"Hullo, Cleeve, good morning!" he cried. "Come

up for a whiff of the breeze? Makes one jolly peckish, doesn't it? I hope the ladies are bucking up a bit! Nothing like fresh air for sea-sickness."

"Oh, yes, thanks," replied Desmond, answering the last question first. "I will get them up after breakfast. Come and walk!"

The two men automatically fell into step, and joined a queue of promenaders. As they walked up and down the spacious deck, the difference in appearance and mannerisms between them was more noticeable than even it had been in the smoking-room the day before. Mallory was a couple of inches taller than Desmond, and whilst the one was dark, with a moustache, the other was fair and clean-shaven. But it was not in physical appearance that the difference principally lay. Mallory appeared younger than his age, whereas Desmond's thirty-five years were in no way concealed. In the latter's steady grey eyes, reposeful and dependable, there was none of that ever-varying expression which shone, humorously and seductively, from those of Jack Mallory. But whilst Mallory would attract by his very force of impulsiveness, the older and cooler-blooded Desmond carried upon his countenance a stamp of helpful action which, in times of stress, it is good to know is near at hand. Jack Mallory was essentially the man for an alluring flirtation. For confidences, a woman would seldom hesitate if Desmond Cleeve were at her elbow.

The clang of the breakfast bell resounded from below. The two men turned on their heels towards the saloon. Mallory, who was leading, suddenly halted to make way for two figures half-blocking the entrance.

"Hullo, Meg!" exclaimed Desmond. "And so you've got here after all. And you too, Miss Cicely! Excellent! I congratulate you."

The smiling face of Margaret Cleeve, as she answered her brother's cheerful greeting, was uncommonly like his. The eyes were softer, but still the same. The mass of chestnut hair, coiled simply in a great knot at the nape of her neck, was darker than her brother's. Her lips, parted in a half smile, displayed the most perfect teeth imaginable. Her figure was slight, with a supple grace of movement which would shew itself later on when she was able to walk the deck with the others. At present she was somewhat pale, but a few hours of the fresh sea breeze would obviously soon renew the touch of life in her cheeks.

"Come along," said Desmond, slipping his arm through his sister's. "The sooner you get some food the better. Besides, we are blocking the gangway." He glanced admiringly at Cicely Rosmead. "*You* don't look very ill, anyway! I believe you are a fraud." He laughed lightly. "But I am afraid I am forgetting my manners. Let me introduce Mr. Mallory—my sister—Miss Rosmead."

Leading the way down to the saloon, Desmond carried his sister off with him as he spoke.

Mallory, whose eyes had not left Cicely's face since he had first realised her presence in the doorway, seized his opportunity.

"Can I help you, Miss Rosmead?" he asked, solicitously offering his arm.

"Oh dear no! thank you," answered the girl, laughing. "I assure you I am quite well now."

Jack Mallory's prevailing fault was decidedly not shyness. To make love at first sight to a pretty girl

was to him, as a rule, only too easy. But, somehow or other, as he glanced at Cicely Rosmead's eyes, half-veiled by long, drooping lashes, and caught the mischievous twinkle therein, he hesitated. The girl was certainly no prude, nor yet was she a fool. He saw that. And as he followed closely by her side and noted the smiling mouth, the heightened colour that his admiring glances had brought to her cheeks, the uncommon blackness of her luxuriant hair, which she wore simply parted in the middle and drawn back loosely from her forehead, and the lithe grace of the youthful figure before him, his ever-ready heart was aflame in a moment.

"At all events," he whispered, "I hope you will allow me to find a seat at your table. I am hungering for conversation. You have no idea how dull this ship has been up to now."

"Of course you may," replied Cicely, entering the saloon, "if you can find a place. But I am quite sure that you and Mr. Cleeve cannot have found it half as dull as we poor things who have been cooped up in the cabin."

Mallory glanced with meaning at the girl's smiling face. She did not appear to notice him. Woman is, however, notoriously deceptive!

"I didn't think so until this moment," he said, "but now I *know* that we were very dull."

The saloon was still far from full as they reached the Cleeves' table. Mallory looked anxiously at the names upon those seats still empty. To be cast adrift amongst strangers at the very moment when his luck seemed especially triumphant would be hard indeed to bear.

"Lots of room, Mallory," said Desmond. "Here

you are; you can sit between the ladies, and I will guard the left flank."

Mallory needed no second bidding. In another moment they were all seated. With Cicely at his side, Jack Mallory at that instant didn't care what else happened.

There were still a great many passengers absent, but the sun shone through the ports, and there was a cheerfulness abroad in the atmosphere which it was difficult for even the sea-sick ones to resist for long. The voyage promised to be a joyful one. Life and laughter on every side already heralded what was to come. The captain, in his place at the head of the centre table, looked pleased; the stewards were alert and watchful; the menu was excellent.

Margaret Cleeve smiled with amusement as she glanced at her brother, and nodded her head. The impulsive attentions of Jack Mallory were already too obvious to be unnoticed. Her duties of chaperone seemed likely to be more onerous than she had at first imagined.

CHAPTER III

The storm which the "Soudan" had weathered in the Bay would seem to have exhausted the powers of the elements in one wild orgie. Certain it is that from that day forward the fates sped the vessel onwards through nothing but the calmest of blue waters, beneath azure skies by day and moonlit glories by night. Gibraltar, with its wondrous rock, the smelly, precipitous, cobbled streets of Malta, the ever-varying scenery of the North African coast, and the hundred-and-one minor incidents of passing ships came and went in due sequence.

Despite her preconceived exalted ideas, Cicely Rosmead became day by day more enwrapped in the interests of her surroundings. Her appreciation of what she saw was as keen and sincere as was her light-hearted acceptance of Jack Mallory's compliments. Margaret also was as happy as the day was long. Desmond noted the changed look in her face, and was content.

Together, the four visited Gibraltar and explored Malta. Desmond, unwilling to intervene between Cicely and Jack, generally looked after his sister, leaving the other two to their own devices. Now and again, however, this arrangement would not be permitted. For some inexplicable reason Cicely, refusing to notice Desmond's most tactful efforts and excuses, would often attach herself to him, leaving the disconsolate Mallory to escort Margaret. Desmond,

who imagined himself as being at the best of times but a dull substitute for the vivacious and handsome Jack, utterly failed to understand Cicely's reasons. Nevertheless, he did not attempt to conceal from himself that he appreciated those moments to the full. The girl's naïveté was delicious. The honest appreciation in her eyes as she listened attentively to his explanations of things seen, and the obvious regard she paid to his opinions, flattered him. The responsiveness of her mirthful faculties to the many humorous incidents of the voyage lifted him, in sympathy, to a delightful plane of irresponsibility which he had not known for years.

The peculiarities of an ocean voyage are such that, before the ship reached Port Said, these four, although so short a time acquainted, had become like old friends. Jack and Cicely had become—certainly so far as the former was able to manage it—inseparables. That Mallory was hopelessly in love was plain to all who cared to read. Margaret smiled, but sometimes sighed and wondered. She knew little of the history of this impetuous young Irishman. He appeared to be desirable. But who knew? In fact, had it not been for her woman's intuition, the cautious Margaret would have been sorely troubled. A woman's instincts, however, are by no means negligible quantities. The occasional glance which she gave to Cicely seemed to ease her mind. Her experience of things was just exactly eight years greater than that of the younger girl. Until she might see within Cicely's eyes that something, which as yet she failed to find, there was time enough for alarm.

Port Said, as the guardian of the Suez Canal, holds

the key to the East. The soft, semi-tropical atmosphere, the babel of the hucksters of Oriental wares in the sandy streets, the Egyptians and Arabs, and the hives of blackened coolies on the great coal barges, were all interesting to those so ready to be pleased. The canal, stretching forth in its white streak of fairyland towards the heart of the desert, seemed to beckon them onwards with alluring persistence.

The coaling of the ship was soon completed. Mallory and Cicely, who had been idling on the hotel verandah, watching jugglers and drinking thick Turkish coffee, did not return to the ship until sunset. The sailors, with blackened faces and trousers rolled above the knees, were already sluicing the decks free of the coal dust which had permeated to every nook and cranny.

In another few moments the dinner gong sounded. Before the meal was finished, the vessel had taken her pilot on board and was under way. Their anxiety to miss nothing of the canal journey caused everybody to make a hurried meal. Mallory had to skip half his dinner in order to follow Cicely on deck. Desmond and Margaret took things more quietly, but they soon followed.

The sunset's reddened glow, almost kaleidoscopic in its tints of crimson and orange and purple, lit up the desert sky with a tropical radiance unseen in western lands. In another half-hour the darkness of Egypt would be upon them. The great search-light, slung half-way up the vessel's foremast, was already lighted.

"Did you ever see anything so wonderful as that heavenly sunset?" asked Margaret enthusiastically.

"I have read that Ceylon is particularly noted for its extraordinarily beautiful sunset effects. If it provides us with as good as this we shall certainly not have journeyed in vain."

"Ripping!" exclaimed Mallory. "But come along up in the bows and see the searchlight spread itself over the desert. It will be dark in a moment."

"What an awful country for the wretched Children of Israel to manœuvre in for forty years!" said Desmond. "I wonder what they would have thought of our searchlight prying into their camps Look! We already appear like some monster with a fiery eye searching for plunder."

"Come on, Mr. Cleeve," cried Cicely excitedly. "It is already quite dark. Mr. Mallory can lecture to us upon the history of the desert."

Mallory, who had hoped for a tête-à-tête conversation with Cicely in the bows, grunted. The girl laughed softly, and he caught a mischievous gleam from beneath her lashes. Her subtle elusiveness was continually douching his too ardent attentions, but that very insecurity of his relationship to her was in itself enough to lead him onwards with increased effort after every rebuff.

"Of course I can," he cried. "I read it up yesterday. The place where the Israelites crossed is after we get out of the canal, in the Gulf of Suez. There's a place there called 'Moses' Wells'—where Moses hit the rock, you know."

"Well done!" laughed Cicely. "Your father will indeed be proud of you if you advance at this rate. You must keep it up; and then we can ask questions all day long."

"I should like *you* to ask me questions all day long," he whispered.

"Oh, *would* you? Well, we'll see. I assure you I am very inquisitive."

It was a wondrous sight as they reached the forecastle. The semi-tropical evening had suddenly succumbed to the darkness of blackest night. The great white streak of the electric searchlight illumined the canal and caught in its embrace, here and there, a little oasis or tying-up station. The unexpectedness of what might be coming next reminded them of a child's first experiences of a magic lantern. The advance guard of the wonders of that great Eastern play for which they had booked seats was at hand. The overture had already begun.

It was long after midnight before they could tear themselves away from the deck, and it was still some time before breakfast when Margaret and Cicely, arm-in-arm, emerged from the saloon again.

Suez was reached before noon. Only then did they settle down once more in their deck chairs to resume the ordinary daily routine of monotony, four days of which must be undergone before that dreadful Red Sea could be left astern.

The conditions of shipboard life had, however, suddenly changed in many ways. The soothing swish of the punkahs at meals was very comforting; the white uniforms of the ship's officers had replaced the usual sombre blue; the heat grew momentarily greater; the midnight hours found the decks covered with mattresses and their sleeping occupants; the consumption of lemons and ice became unbelievable.

The ship remained at Aden only a couple of hours, but even that little break was welcome. Mallory

expended a small fortune in throwing coins to the Arab diving boys. Margaret and Cicely, in their most diaphanous white frocks, watched the divers, and bargained for ostrich feathers with the occupants of the Arab boats. Everything was new to them, and many a blasé traveller listened to their enthusiastic comments with envy.

After leaving Aden, the weather grew somewhat cooler. The wind, which had been on the ship's quarter, veered ahead. The sea was almost as calm as a sheet of glass. A pair of porpoises, rushing round and round the great ship at night through the phosphorescent water, resembled the flight of gigantic rockets. Never could imagination have pictured more indescribable phosphorescent effects than were seen on those moonless nights on the Indian Ocean.

The days wore on in never-varying sequence until it seemed as if the old English home life must be but the dream of some disordered imagination. That any other life than the present could ever have been theirs, or was ever likely to be theirs, seemed but an idle thought. The luxurious days of absolute freedom from care soothed them into mental and physical inertia. The spell of the East had already begun to eat into their very hearts. They were in no hurry to reach their destination. Jack Mallory, for one, began to wish that they never would reach it. What was to happen to him if the others packed up and bid him "good-bye" at Colombo he dared not pause to think.

But everything comes to an end at last. The final night on the Indian Ocean came only too soon. At dinner, the captain announced that they would be in Colombo harbour before noon next day. Mallory

glanced at Cicely, and his heart sank. But the tides of a single individual's affairs cannot make the world stand still.

When morning broke, the vessel was rapidly running down the coast of Ceylon. The coastline, sandy-beached and begirt with cocoanut palms and palmyras as far as the eye could reach, was close on the port bow. An endless line of surf rolled up from the open ocean to the very feet of the palms. An odour of vegetation, aromatically redolent of the jungle, was wafted seawards. Ceylon, with all its wealth of flora, its pearls and amethysts, its rubber and tea estates, and its world-famed ruins, was almost within a stone's throw.

CHAPTER IV

"I HOPE Gordon got my letter, and will be here to meet us," said Desmond.

The ship's anchor chains were rattling through the hawse holes. As she swung round to the tide the agent's boat was already at the gangway. The harbour, filled with shipping of all nationalities, presented a characteristically picturesque scene. Outside the artificial harbour the surf beat powerlessly upon the great stone breakwater, but within, all was peace.

The Cleeves, with Cicely and Mallory, leaned over the rail watching the innumerable shore-boats clamouring for fares.

Suddenly Desmond felt himself clapped upon the shoulder. He turned, to find a tall, dark, clean-shaven man holding out his hand.

"You are Desmond Cleeve, of course?" said the latter. "Although it is so many years since I have seen you, you couldn't be anybody else, I am sure."

"Gordon, by Jove! There is certainly no mistaking you, either," cried Desmond, seizing his hand heartily. "You are not the slim youth I once knew, but there is no mistaking your eyes, old fellow. Let me introduce you to my sister, and——"

"I think it is my duty to introduce myself," interrupted Cicely, gaily, her eyes dancing with delight, "as a dutiful niece should."

"Oh, and so this is little Cicely, is it?" replied Gordon, taking her hand with evident embarrassment.

"*Little*, indeed!" exclaimed Cicely.

Gordon, still holding her hand as if he didn't quite know what to do with such a soft member, broke into a characteristic chuckle.

"Ah, I see I shall have to alter my ideas somewhat, now that I find myself the uncle of a real grown-up young beauty."

"Oh," gasped Cicely, blushing. Then, with suspicious mirth curling her lips, she looked Gordon slowly up and down. "Don't you think you might—er—venture to kiss the—er—beauty?" she asked demurely.

"I am afraid I have almost forgotten how," he laughed, barely touching her cheek with his lips.

"Now that we have been properly settled, Uncle Gerald, I think we might take a little notice of Mr. Mallory, who, I know, is longing to meet you. He is a friend of ours," said Cicely.

Mallory seized, with the vigour of a young giant, the hand stretched out to him. Now that the possibility of leaving Cicely seemed imminent, he could afford to lose no opportunity which might lead to further concessions.

"Well, then," said Gordon, "now that we are all acquainted, I see no need to remain on this stuffy ship. I have already booked rooms at the Galle Face Hotel for to-night, and we may as well get along there at once, and have tiffin in peace. The luggage can follow."

"May I come, too, Miss Cleeve?" asked Mallory, plaintively.

"Why, of course," cried Margaret, smiling. "To drop us at the first opportunity would be most impolite."

Mallory needed no second bidding. In another

moment, in the exuberance of his recovered equilibrium, he had rushed down the gangway and gained possession of a boat.

The distance to the landing-stage was not half-a-mile, and at the entrance to the jetty a long string of rickshaws was lined up. Under Gordon's guidance they captured five of these. The novelty of being drawn along by coolies through the soft, seductive atmosphere elicited delighted comments from all, and with a cry of delight Cicely climbed into hers at once.

At a sharp run they were drawn past lines of native shops up the main street, past Government House, and out upon the open esplanade fronting the sea. The long straight road of brick-red earth ran parallel with the beach, where the great rollers of the Indian Ocean thundered upon the sands.

Mallory challenged Cicely to a race, whereupon the latter's coolie, with his lighter load, forged so fast ahead, with long, swinging strides, that the heavier Mallory had no chance.

The vestibule of the hotel at the far end of this road was filled with people. The Cingalese waiters, flitting to and fro in their white clothes, their black, glossy hair in topknots, and wearing tortoiseshell combs, seemed strangely weird.

Whilst the ladies went to their rooms, the three men repaired to the bar, where Gordon ordered three of his favourite Manhattan cocktails. Within a few minutes, under the genial influence of this delectable refreshment, Mallory had so ingratiated himself with Gordon that the latter, there and then, invited him to join the others in their visit to his estate.

Gordon had already reserved a tiffin table on the verandah under an electric fan. The lunch was

good; the long iced drinks were better; the ocean rolled in almost at their feet; a soft, languorous breeze blew shorewards. Under the mellowing influence of coffee and cigarettes Gordon listened to the description of their voyage, and unfolded his own plans for their future movements.

"There is no use in remaining in the stuffy heat of Colombo," he said. "I can show you all you would wish to see here by to-morrow. We had better go up-country by the night mail to-morrow. My motor car will meet us at Nanuoya, and we will go straight off to my bungalow, which is only about four miles from there. I am only a lone bachelor, but I hope you will be comfortable enough for a few days. When you become tired of resting, I have arranged a motor trip for you. I think you will like that." He chuckled and turned to Cicely. "My *big* niece here will have to be my chaperone."

"Oh, I'll look after you all right!" cried Cicely, her blue eyes dancing with merriment.

"Humph! And I expect I shall have to look after you, too. By the way, there is usually a dance at this hotel on Saturday nights."

"Oh, how delightful!" exclaimed Cicely. "That is to-night. Will you dance with me, Uncle Gerald?"

"We'll see," replied Gordon, smiling. "I expect lots of other people will be able to take my place, in any case. I know heaps of young soldier officers and naval men who generally turn up on these occasions."

"Oh, what fun!"

"Humph!" grunted Gordon with amusement. "We will see. As your severe uncle I must take care that you are not spoiled."

"Pouf!" cried Cicely, with a trill of laughter. "It is good for girls to be spoiled. They should have everything that they want, and it is the duty of uncles to see that they get it—*always*."

Desmond, quietly smoking a cigarette, broke into a gentle chuckle. Cicely's heightened colour, her merry, dancing eyes, and the poise of her youthful, lissom figure presented an entrancing picture. He caught her glance, and she could not have failed to see the approval in his eyes.

"*You* will dance with me, anyway, won't you, Mr. Cleeve?" she asked, alluringly.

"Yes," answered Desmond simply, "I will."

"Well then, ladies all, I should advise you now to take a rest. About five o'clock, when the sun has dropped a bit, I will take you to see the residential part of Colombo. We can end up at Princes Club, where the local aristocracy generally foregather of an evening."

At the appointed time they were quite ready. It had grown much cooler, but rickshaws were again in demand.

The long red roads wound between miles of private compounds. The luxuriance of the tropical foliage; the beautiful Indian gold-mohur trees, whose gorgeous flamboyant flowers met the eye at every turn; purple bourgainvillia climbing porches of bungalows; the capacious bungalows themselves, some of them creeper-clad; here and there a giant banyan tree with hanging roots seeking a grasp upon the warm earth; all combined to cheat the senses, still unattuned to Eastern life, into a simulation of unreality. Neither Margaret nor Cicely would have been surprised at any moment to wake up and find that it was all a dream.

The cool, green lawn at Princes Club was very soothing after the heat of the day. Men, in riding-kit, fresh from polo, tennis players, and ladies in the latest London frocks gossiped and drank around the little tables.

Gordon led off Jack Mallory to introduce him to some kindred spirits inside the large white building, from which the click of billiard balls resounded. The others were quite content to sit and watch the world go round as it willed. In fact, they refused to move until it was time to return to the hotel.

Dinner at the hotel was barely over when the band of an Indian regiment began to play on the verandah. A large hall was cleared for dancing. Not only were the occupants of the hotel present, but many parties of Colombo residents either dined there for the sake of the dance, or came in later.

Gordon seemed to know everyone. Whilst Cicely was still in the throes of withstanding Mallory's excessive demands for dances, Gordon was assailed by a couple of young officers of the garrison for an introduction to his niece. Two or three enthusiastic naval officers followed. These, having secured the promise of dances for themselves, were not slow in leading forward their friends. In a few moments Cicely could have filled her programme three times over. Jack Mallory, who had to content himself with two waltzes only, had suddenly succumbed to gloom. A subaltern, hailing from his own emerald isle, invited him to drink. The open admiration of the former for Cicely was quite enough, however, to spoil Jack's enjoyment of his society.

The night was desperately hot for dancing, but nobody seemed to mind it. Gordon, with Margaret

on his arm, had already entered the ball-room before Cicely could escape from her little coterie of worshippers. Desmond had held her to her promise to dance the first dance with him. Cicely had never danced with him before. She had, in fact, never associated him in her mind with a ball-room. Her eyes opened with surprise, however, as he piloted her down the crowded room. His skill was a revelation to her.

It was a delicious dance. The dreamy waltz—" A Thousand Kisses "—was over all too soon. The girl had not had many opportunities of dancing since she left school. The whole atmosphere of this tropical night held her enthralled. As Desmond and she sought the coolness of the garden of the hotel, many eyes watched them admiringly. Despite the heat, Cicely had never looked better. She was dressed in her smartest frock, of pale green satin, short in the skirt and covered with a tunic of blue-shot ninon trimmed with pearls.

Outside in the garden half a dozen great cocoanut trees hung over the ocean, amongst the branches of which sparkled little coloured electric lamps; the roll of the white surf upon the beach sounded very cool after the heated ball-room; the moon shone brilliantly.

Desmond was unusually silent, but Cicely did not seem to notice. She seemed to feel the spirit of absolute content within her. The band had already played half the next waltz before she awoke to the fact that Mallory, whose dance it was, was standing at her elbow.

On Sunday morning the whole party went to the military church. Then, in a hired motor, Gordon drove them to Mount Lavinia. This famous hotel,

overlooking the sea from a rocky promontory, seven miles from Colombo, was crowded with visitors by the time they arrived. Gordon explained that the Mount Lavinia Sunday fish tiffin, as a feature of Ceylon, must be undergone, whether they hungered or not. He had already reserved a table.

It was a gay luncheon, and never before had Gordon's guests seen so many varieties of fish served at one time. Oysters, crabs, whitebait, seer, &c., followed in what seemed a never-ending march. They cried quits at last, and repaired to the plateau outside, from where a clear seven miles of sandy beach, fringed by dense cocoanut plantations, could be seen spreading out between them and Colombo. Several catamaran fishing-boats arrived as they sat in chairs, watching. The natives, almost naked, rushed into the surf and dragged in the boats. The catch had not been particularly good, but several seer of quite forty pounds each were thrown out upon the sand.

They idled away the afternoon until tea-time. Jack Mallory was happy again. The prospect of having Cicely all to himself once more as soon as they reached up-country was alluring. He had not enjoyed the dance of the night before at all. And even to-day Cicely was unusually irresponsive. The influence of Colombo, in Jack's opinion, was not good for her.

The rush back to Colombo in the motor was delightful. The train for up-country did not start until ten o'clock. They had dinner comfortably at the hotel, and drove in rickshaws, with plenty of time to spare, to Maradana station.

Margaret and Cicely were quite pleased with their

two-berthed sleeping compartment, and made themselves comfortable at once. The beds looked inviting, and they were already sleepy.

Gordon piloted the men into the gentlemen's compartment and ordered whisky and soda. Then he returned to the platform and the ladies' end of the car, and for a few moments watched Margaret Cleeve arranging her luggage. As she smoothed her fair hair before the little mirror, the womanly softness in her grey eyes seemed to Gordon very good to look upon.

"I hope you have everything you want," he said presently. "Remember that you are to keep your eyes open for a station called 'Talawakele.' It is a fiendish name to English eyes, like most others in Ceylon, but you will see it on the station board plainly enough. It will be about six o'clock then, and time to dress. We reach Nanuoya about an hour later."

"All right," answered Margaret. "I'll remember. This is a delightful little sleeping carriage."

"Well then, I'll wish you 'good night.' Be good, Cicely!"

"*Perhaps* — I'll see," cried Cicely flippantly. "There goes the whistle! You'll be left behind, if you don't run."

CHAPTER V

An indescribable glow of crimsoned tints irradiated the heavens. A filmy cloud of fire hung about a conical mountain on the distant skyline. The sun had already disappeared behind a line of purple hills bounding the horizon. The air was soft and balmy like an English early autumn.

A couple of small tables, laden with silver, tea-cups and sandwiches, stood upon a plateau in front of a brown wooden bungalow. Stone steps leading to a winding path below disappeared behind a rockery, amongst which maidenhair ferns flourished in wild profusion. The perfume of heliotrope was wafted from a broad flower-bed encircling the front of the house. A bed of violets lay beyond the rockery. There were roses, white and yellow and red, in fullest bloom, and a monkey-puzzler tree rustled its branches drowsily in the evening breeze.

As far almost as the eye could reach, down to a roaring stream in the valley below and up again on the other side, was the never-ending greenness of tea bushes. Here and there a row of albizzia trees, planted to shade the tea, stood forth like sentinels over their charges. The path from the bungalow, brown and rocky, wound its way, zig-zag, down the hill, until it lost itself beneath the shadow of a red-walled tea factory, three hundred feet below. A gang of coolie women, each laden with a long narrow basket upon her back, filed silently through the greenness towards the factory.

The stillness was broken by a whistling noise to the left. Suddenly a bundle of wood, tied to a running wheel, shot down a wire rope from a hill above the bungalow.

"There goes the last consignment of firewood from the clearing," sa ' Gordon. "That wire shoot is nearly a mile long.

Margaret lazily turr er eyes upwards. "I think that the peace of this ace is perfectly heavenly," she remarked. "And just *do* look at those orange tints above that mountain peak! The Egyptian sunset over the desert was good enough for ordinary mortals, but this, to-night, is an epicurean feast."

"That conical point is Adam's peak," said Gordon. "It is a most holy place in the eyes of the Buddhists. They make pilgrimages to a temple at the top, where the imprint of Buddha's foot is said to be. He touched the place with his foot as he flew skywards away from Ceylon to India."

"How foolish of him to go!" murmured Cicely.

Desmond, silently smoking a pipe, sat listening in a long armchair. Jack Mallory, reclining at Cicely's feet, was meditatively chewing a blade of grass. The latter, her hands idle in her lap, appeared to be studying the landscape.

Suddenly Cicely sprang to her feet.

"Don't you think it is time we had our tea, Uncle Gerald?" she asked. "As your only hostess, it is time that I bestirred myself. I am sure that you badly need a sensible woman to look after you."

"*Sensible woman!*" exclaimed Gordon facetiously. "Help!"

"Don't be rude! Come along, Mr. Mallory, and pass these sandwiches."

Jack was up in a moment. That long day, practically alone with Cicely, had been Paradise to him. Since their first arrival in the motor that morning the hours had slipped by in one happy whirl. As self-constituted *châtelaine* of her uncle's domain, Cicely had blossomed forth in a light which he had never seen before. He had never known her in her own home. As she now stood at the tea-table and poured out the tea, he watched her with increasing interest. She had never looked daintier or more desirable. Dressed in a simple green frock, with a short skirt and sleeves reaching just below the elbow, black buckled shoes, and black stockings, she seemed even more youthful than she was. With her dark hair and blue eyes she might have been meant in her present costume to represent the embodiment of the maiden grace of Ireland.

Desmond Cleeve, as he smoked, was watching her furtively almost without his own knowledge. Gerald Gordon, smiling affectionately at her, wondered why he had been such a fool as never to have married. Presently he screwed up his countenance critically, and broke into a soft chuckle of laughter.

"May I ask whether you are wearing green in honour of Mr. Mallory?" he inquired.

"Mr. Mallory, indeed!" exclaimed Cicely indignantly. "You forget that I am as much Irish as anything else. And, in any case, I had the trouble of making the frock myself, so I may as well get some work out of it."

"You never made it yourself," cried Gordon, unbelievingly.

"I did—*truly*. You are very rude. You don't

know me one bit yet. There are lots of clever things I can do."

"Oh, indeed! For instance?"

Cicely's eyes filled with laughter, and the corners of her mouth lifted mischievously. She glanced up from beneath her lashes with challenging impudence. "You wait," she murmured. "It isn't for men—even uncles—to know too much all at once."

A silent-footed Tamil servant, carrying a plate of tea-cakes, approached from the house. He was an old man, showing the greyness of his hair below an enormous red turban. He departed as silently as he had come.

"Why doesn't the old man wear a comb like the servants at the Colombo hotel?" asked Margaret.

"It is only the Cingalese who wear combs," explained Gordon. "The native inhabitants of Ceylon are mostly of two races only, which, centuries ago, were always at war. Then, besides these Tamils and Cingalese, there are the Burghers, who are descended from the old original Dutch settlers. David professes to be a Christian. He has been with me for nearly twenty years. When I came out here as a lad of twenty he was the best legacy that my predecessor could have given me."

"Did you like it when you first came out?" asked Desmond.

"I didn't mind it. There was plenty of hard work. For nine months I served an old-established planter in the capacity of a student—commonly known as a 'creeper.' I had to learn Tamil. All the coolie labour force are Tamils. I had to climb hills all day, watching the pluckers, superintending the pruners, and learning to handle the coolies. Then there was

the tea-making in the factory, and the keeping of the estate accounts to learn. I hadn't much time to think in those days, nor had I much money either."

"Wasn't it lonely when you first started to live alone?" asked Mallory.

"*Very*. Especially during the rains. When the monsoon beats down on that old roof there for days and weeks on end, night and day, it takes a bit of getting used to. I don't think I could have stuck it as a mere employee for always. Fortunately I was left a legacy. I bought some new land here, and opened it up. I was very lucky, and prospered. Then I bought a share in a rubber place in the low country. Rubber boomed, and I was again lucky. I am used to the place now." He glanced with unconscious affection across the valley, and paused to light a cigarette. "Now, as the owner of about five hundred acres of tea, I have become an established landmark, I suppose. It is still sometimes lonely, all the same. There are neighbours, of course, and sometimes people pay me visits. But it is at a time like this, when ladies deign to visit my poor domain, that I realise how lonely one really is between whiles."

"What you want, Uncle Gerald, is a really nice wife," intervened Cicely, nodding her head thoughtfully. "I must see to it."

Gordon laughed softly. "And so the romance of the jungle is already calling to you, hey? As a practical measure, however, I think we had better retire to the bungalow. We are only 4,500 feet up, but it will be quite cold in another half-hour."

When the gong rang for dinner, there was a bright fire of logs burning in the drawing-room. It was a pleasant room, with two bow windows, from which

the view by daylight was superb. With the curtains drawn, and the English furniture and rugs, there was practically nothing to distinguish it from England. It was a bachelor's room, and yet there was an air of refinement about it almost feminine. The pictures, the silver bowls and vases filled with flowers, and the presence of a piano added to this effect. There were heaps of the latest books and magazines, and many comfortable chintz-covered chairs.

Dinner on that first night was a cheerful meal. After the heat of Colombo the sudden change to almost English life was very pleasant. The Tamil servants were adept waiters, and the cook had done his best. After dinner the men remained to smoke, but Margaret and Cicely were easily lured by the thought of those luxurious chairs and crackling fire into the drawing-room.

Presently, the soothing notes of Schubert's "Adieu" floated lingeringly across the hall. The men automatically ceased talking to listen. Jack Mallory slipped away in search of Cicely. Margaret was at the piano. Cicely, daintily recumbent in a chair several sizes too large for her, stretched her feet towards the fire.

"Come and look at the glorious night," urged Jack.

"I am very comfy here, thanks," replied Cicely, smiling. "You may sit down here, though, if you like. Do you want to talk?"

"Yes," whispered Jack softly, drawing up a chair.

Margaret played on unheedingly. She had a more than ordinarily sympathetic touch, and had been well taught. A melody which Mallory had never heard before drifted dreamily through the room.

Cicely was idly watching the antics of a minute lizard which, ensconced behind a lamp upon the wall, caught flies almost as big as himself and gulped them down until his little body swelled like a drum.

"Well, go on!" she said indifferently. "Talk!"

"Humph!" he grunted.

Cicely flashed a glance at him out of the corners of her laughing eyes, and then continued to study the toe of her slipper.

"I think a planter's life must be very jolly, don't you?" ventured Jack.

"It depends," she admitted slowly. "Isn't Uncle Gerald nice?"

"Rather!" exclaimed Mallory enthusiastically. "Did you know that he had invited me to join your motor trip?"

He watched the girl's downcast eyes anxiously, but her long lashes did not move. For a moment there was silence.

"Shall I accept?" he asked presently. "He says the car will hold five comfortably."

"Well, then, why hesitate?" she inquired, glancing upwards in well-feigned surprise.

"But would *you* like me to?" he asked, bending over her chair.

"Why, of course, if you care to come. Besides, it is good for boys to see the world."

"Oh! *Boy* indeed! I'm four years older than you, anyway."

Cicely sniffed audibly. "I shouldn't have thought it," she said.

Jack's brain was working slowly. The near presence of Cicely invariably seemed to have that effect upon him. Certainly his four years' seniority

had, so far, given him no advantage over her. He nerved himself for some desperate effort. To accomplish some deed of valour for her sake would have been easy, but his attempts at sentiment met with a patronising tolerance which was maddening.

Margaret feelingly played Beethoven's "Farewell to the piano." Gordon, afraid of disturbing her, stepped quietly into the room, and slipped into a chair by her side. As she sat at the piano, the soul of the music in her eyes, he watched her fingers caressing the keys, and wondered. Dressed in a black frock of some diaphanous material which accentuated the whiteness of her skin, her abundant chestnut hair shining in the lamplight, she appealed to him with a force that a week before he would have believed impossible. As she finished, she half-turned, and her eyes met his. He had not spoken one word, but what she saw caused her cheeks to flush, and her fingers again fell quickly upon the keys.

"Where is Mr. Cleeve?" called Cicely.

"Smoking in the hall, I believe," answered Gordon.

"What a misanthrope! I'll go and rout him out."

Mallory groaned aloud. The girl uncurled from her chair, stretched herself to her full height, presented Jack with a parting glance of mischievous mirth, and ran out into the passage.

The hall was really a spacious room where long lounge chairs invited repose. But Desmond was not asleep. From where he sat he could easily hear the voices in the drawing-room. His pipe glowed in the semi-darkness. He turned his head suddenly as the swish of Cicely's skirt and the click of heels upon the polished wooden floor reached him.

"I am coming to talk to you. May I?" she asked.

Desmond sprang up and offered her a chair.

"What have I done to be so specially honoured?" he inquired. "I hope you and Mallory haven't quarrelled?"

"Oh dear no. Mr. Mallory and I don't quarrel. It is sometimes necessary for me to snub him gently, but snubbing is good for boys."

"I am afraid it is so long since I was one that I cannot remember," said Desmond slowly. "I have had so much anxiety during the last year that it seems a century since I was a boy."

Cicely studied her toes for quite a minute. Then she glanced for an instant at the motionless figure in the chair beside her. His expression told her nothing.

"Do you know," she said irrelevantly, "that I shall be a woman in three months?"

"Oh! Do you mean twenty-one?"

"Yes. I am getting quite old," she answered, sagely nodding her head.

"Humph!"

"Why do you grunt like that? Don't you think I am getting old?"

The expression in Desmond's grey eyes softened, but his clean-shaven mouth moved not a muscle. Cicely, her chin upon her hands, and her elbows on the arms of the chair, waited expectantly. Her slim figure, silhouetted in the dim light, certainly did not speak of growing age.

"Answer me, please," she said presently. "Don't you think I am older than my age? Do you think—?"

Suddenly and unexpectedly Desmond took his pipe out of his mouth and leaned nearer the girl. "Would you really like to know what I think of you?" he interrupted.

Cicely's hands dropped, and her pensive attitude fled before genuine astonishment. A certain unknown tone in Desmond's voice arrested her. She glanced quickly and curiously at his face. For some inexplicable reason her heart beat most uncomfortably. For a few moments neither of them spoke. Then Desmond's pipe again began to glow.

"I don't think," he said, weighing his words, "that it would be interesting to you, or—good for me if I told you. I wonder how much you know of yourself yet."

"Come along Cicely," called Margaret's voice from the drawing room. "Don't you think that we ought to go to bed?"

"Good night," said Desmond softly.

CHAPTER VI

THE next morning broke with a cloudless sky. Long before the others had been roused by the arrival of their early tea Gordon had left the bungalow. David stated that ' master ' had gone to the factory. It was, however, still quite early when Margaret and Cicely emerged.

" Come on, all of you," cried Cicely gaily, " we will go and see him in his den. I know the way to the factory."

Down the winding path she ran. A heavy dew was still upon the grass. Out upon the surrounding hills of tea bushes the gangs of coolies, some of them but children, could be seen steadily plucking the young green shoots, and throwing them over their shoulders into the baskets slung upon their backs. Here and there a baby, generally absolutely innocent of clothes, played in the vicinity. Passing down the path, they came upon a long line of mud-walled huts, about which played innumerable naked children. Lower down still, the red roof of the factory shewed up brilliantly against the green foliage of the gum trees.

At the factory door they were met by a native in European clothes, who said he was the ' tea maker.' He sent a coolie to fetch Gordon.

The latter, in riding breeches and putties, and wearing the conventional double Terai hat of the planter, hurried towards them. A powerful aromatic odour of warm tea permeated the place.

There was a hum of machinery, with the half-naked figures of coolies flitting hither and thither. Escorted by Gordon, they climbed a wooden stairway to the upper storey of the building. Here, long strips of sacking cloth, covered with drying green tea-leaves, were stretched across the room. It was here that the fresh leaf remained until a certain proportion of its moisture evaporated in the heated air. There was no machinery whatever in this room.

Down below was the engine, but, with plenty of water on hand, as was the case at that time of year, the great wheel which controlled the simple machinery could be easily run by water power from the stream pouring down the hillside. In the time of drought, the engine, fed by wood or oil fuel, had to be used.

Curious rotatory metal platforms whirled the tea about and rolled it. Large sifters, composed of several layers of different-sized wire mesh, shook from side to side with their load of tea, thus separating the coarse from the fine. The last remaining dust, almost brick-colored, was valuable, as Gordon explained, for the manufacture of tea bricks, and brought an excellent price in the Russian market.

Heaps of tea lay about on white cloths spread upon the stone floor. Upon these the coolies were patiently engaged, picking out odds and ends of sticks and dirt. Stacks of empty white wooden chests, each capable of holding about a hundred pounds of tea, awaited the packers. Two coolies were carefully making square bags out of lead foil. Everything was methodically and carefully done with that Oriental patience of labour which never tires.

After the warmth of the factory, the air outside seemed quite chilly, for it was still early enough in

the day for the crispness of the morning to cling to the shadows.

"I have just been to the motor shed," said Gordon, leading the way down the narrow path. "The car is in excellent trim, and so long as you ladies do not insist upon taking too much baggage, we shall fit in nicely. It is a new 25-horse-power Daimler. I have only had it three months. We have had a specially good year at tea this year, and so I went a burst, and bought a good one while I was about it. I am rather proud of my estate. You see, I planted most of it myself."

"What is that bare brown patch over there on the hillside?" asked Margaret, pointing across the valley.

"Oh, that has just been pruned. One has to cut down the bushes about every two years. The ground is then manured with phosphates, etc., and, except for keeping it weeded, it is left in peace until the new leaves sprout."

"What an enormous amount of tea you must have," said Cicely.

"Oh, a tea bush is a deceptive thing. One of these good ones here does not yield in a year more than one quarter pound of the tea as you know it. That means one pound of green leaf. If you watch the pluckers, you will see that they pick only the smallest and freshest leaves. When we have plenty of rain we pluck each bush about once in ten days. We turn our coolie gangs on to a fresh plot every day. The bushes are planted, as you can see, about three feet by six."

"What about labour?" asked Desmond. "It must be quite a business looking after an army of coolies like this."

"Well, that is practically our only trouble at present. Still, we cannot grumble too much. All the coolies are recruited from the South of India. They pay their fare here on money lent to them by us. We have overseers, called 'kanghanis,' who father the coolie gangs. Every coolie is in debt to the estate, and when he leaves an estate he must be provided with a discharge note. Any other estate employing him must take over his debt with him. To crimp labour at the present day is a cardinal sin. No planter of any degree of respectability would attempt it. If a coolie bolts, his description is published in the newspapers."

"Do they earn much?" asked Desmond.

"An averagely good plucker earns about sevenpence a day. It only costs him about five rupees a month for rice, and he is housed by the estate, so that, compared with his brother coolies of India, he is well off. All the rice comes from India—that is why it is so expensive. Ceylon can only supply enough for its own villagers." He pointed towards a hollow several hundred feet below. "You see that very light green open glade, with the oxen pulling a wooden plough through the mud! That is a paddy, or rice-field, being ploughed for the next crop. Those terraces are for the artificial irrigation, whereby the water flows over the rice downstairs, as it were."

"How many coolies have you got?" asked Margaret. "You must be quite a little king."

"Oh; about five hundred," laughed Gordon. "One requires about one coolie per acre. There is the pruning to be done as well as the plucking, of course, and then there is wood cutting and clearing."

"I think I should like this life immensely," cried

Mallory enthusiastically. He glanced down at Cicely's white topee, and added :—"Under certain conditions."

"Well, you might do worse," said Gordon, "particularly if you can command some capital. A creeper at the present day doesn't spend more than six months at his creeping. During that time he generally lives in the house of his instructor, to whom he pays a premium of anything from £50 to £100, and a small amount for his board. He learns Tamil, and anything else which the planter tells him, and when an opportunity offers, and his teacher's conscience will permit of his being recommended as fit, he gets a billet as a junior assistant. That generally means a small bungalow of his own somewhere on the estate, free firewood, the services of a couple of coolies, and about R125 per month pay. Then, if he is worth his salt, he ought soon to rise to greater things. I am surrounded here by heaps of ex-public school boys, and, here and there, one finds an ex-army or navy officer who prefers peace to everlasting uncertainty. There is plenty of tennis at certain points of rendezvous, and even football and hockey, as you will see later on. We have an excellent little club ground not far from here, where I hope to introduce you on the occasion of our yearly sports. I shall have to give a house party, I expect, so you will have a chance of playing hostess, Cicely."

"H'm! What does it cost to buy a place of one's own?" asked Mallory, his thoughts flying towards a romantic future.

"That is not quite easy to answer. You see, it depends upon position and the condition of the estate. Roughly speaking, about ten years' purchase. It runs from about £50 to £100 an acre, the high prices

being for the up-country estates. You ought to get quite ten per cent. on your outlay, but, of course, when you open out new land and plant it yourself, your ultimate profits upon outlay should be much greater. If you have no capital, it is a poor game as regards money. You can earn up to say £500 or £600 a year after years of toil, and you may even become a visiting agent and make as much as a couple of thousand pounds a year in fees. I wouldn't calculate upon the latter if I were you, though. Some of the estates are now working a pension fund, to which the employees pay 5 per cent. of their salary, and the company an equal amount. I am rather in favour of that." He paused, and his face dropped. "I—er—am afraid I have been very loquacious. I am so interested myself that I forget my audience's different standpoint."

"I, for one, have enjoyed every word of it," cried Margaret.

"Of course!" added Desmond.

"It might be made a very nice life indeed," murmured Mallory.

"I think we have all earned our breakfast by now, in any case; don't you?" said Gordon, leading the way up the hill.

Whether they had earned it or not, his guests certainly shewed no sloth in following him.

A planter's breakfast is of the variety which other people call lunch. The profusion of steaks, chops, cold ham, curries, and what-not upon the table was astonishing.

"You planter fellows don't starve!" cried Mallory joyfully.

"No," laughed Gordon. "Why should we?

What will you drink? There is tea, claret, beer, whisky, or perhaps—"

"Mr. Mallory will drink tea, of course!" intervened Cicely severely. "Imagine whisky for breakfast!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Mallory, "I could—quite easily."

Gordon laughed lightly. "Well?" he asked.

"Tea, please," answered Jack meekly, glancing at Cicely.

Old David seemed to be everywhere at once. The inherent instincts of a century of hereditary servitude caused him to anticipate wishes in a manner bordering upon inspiration.

"That is a remarkably good servant of yours," said Desmond during one of the numerous absences of David *en route* to the kitchen.

"Yes, he is a good 'boy.' I have trained him a lot in various ways. In our early days he used to keep all my small pay and run the house for me. Like all native servants who are allowed to absolutely run their masters, his accounts at the end of the month would invariably coincide with every penny I possessed. When he committed a serious fault, I would fine him. That method of punishment, however, I soon discovered to be ridiculously ineffective. I would tell him that he was fined one rupee. He would accept my adjudication with resignation. But at the end of that month my bills would come to exactly R301 instead of R300. And for the life of me I would be unable to find a flaw in his charges for details of expenditure. Then I struck upon an expedient, which was so effective that in a very short time it did away with all occasion for fining. I used to say, 'David, you are fined one rupee. Your pay is fifteen rupees;

this month you get only fourteen.' With that I would promptly throw a rupee out into the jungle, or down my well, which was a very deep one. There was then one rupee gone out of the world altogether—David hadn't got it, and 'master' hadn't got it. There was no possible way of getting it back. Whereupon the wretched David would weep bitter tears."

At that moment the renowned David appeared on the scene bearing a dish of chipped potatoes. His spotless white garments seemed symbolical of purity, and his great red turban surmounted a visage upon which no shadow of guile had left a mark. Placing himself respectfully behind his master's chair, his face was bland and expressionless. As Desmond Cleeve glanced up at him, he realised that behind those dark eyes lay a depth of Eastern lore and logic which few Western men could ever hope to fathom successfully.

CHAPTER VII

After a keen foursome at tennis on the brown gravel court behind the bungalow in the afternoon, they were all sufficiently tired to find an early departure to bed most welcome. Nevertheless, Gordon urged them to pack overnight what few things they would need on the motor. The heavier luggage was to go by train.

It was not more than seven o'clock the next morning when they actually got away. Gordon drove the big car himself, his assistant being a native boy whom he had trained, more or less, to understand the ordinary mechanism of the car. This boy usually sat upon the step.

Gordon invited Margaret to sit in front, the capacious *tonneau* easily holding the other three, in addition to guns and rifles, cartridges, and emergency rations, and many other small impedimenta which might be useful for a journey that would lead them into many a deserted road.

The morning was perfect. The crisp, rarefied air of the hills and the ever-varying scenery were wonderfully exhilarating.

Cicely was in delightful spirits. Between her enthusiastic criticisms of the scenery she openly flirted with Mallory. Desmond, as usual, smoked his pipe in comparative silence, but Cicely did not fail to keep his attention occupied. She was dressed in a well-fitting tailor-made blue serge coat and skirt, with a patent leather black waistbelt, which showed off her

figure to its best advantage. Blue was Desmond's favourite colour, and he told her so.

Margaret took her joys with less exuberance than the younger girl, but her happiness was apparent in her eyes. An atmosphere of irresponsibility and joyous expectation seemed to leave no room for care.

The road rose rapidly. It turned and twisted like some gigantic snake wriggling in its death agony. Upon one side it was bounded by high lands, mostly covered with the ever-present tea bushes, whilst, on the left, there was a sudden drop between it and a valley far below, where roared a mountain torrent. On the far horizon stood forth the purple haze of the hills.

It was only at the particularly dangerous turns that any pretence at stone parapet had been provided. A false turn of the hand upon the steering wheel would have precipitated the car into the depths below. At first Margaret would involuntarily grip the side of the car in alarm, but after a time she learned to place implicit confidence in the steady eye and wrist of her host. The Ceylon roads are not built for novices, but Gordon was not one of these. He took no risks.

Banks of luxuriant maidenhair ferns spread upwards, here and there, on their right. An occasional red tea factory disclosed itself in the valley. Great country carts, drawn by oxen, upon which the motor horn was used with but little effect, crawled downwards round the curves. No man on earth can hustle a bull who is determined not to move beyond a walk. There were practically no level bits. Upwards and ever upwards they climbed, until Nanuoya railway station loomed up on the horizon. From that place

a little narrow-gauge railway mounted by the most curling road that surely any train ever travelled. This was the branch line to the hill station of Nuwara Eliya, which is used as the health resort for the jaded residents of Colombo.

Here and there a waterfall tumbled picturesquely into the river below. The vegetation began to assume a less tropical appearance. Now and again a characteristic Keena tree rose above its lesser brethren of the jungle. Its extraordinary gnarled trunk, expanding above into a great flat top, and its small brilliant red and green leaves were sufficient to identify it at once.

The road turned upon itself, and the car shot across a wide bridge. The railroad, thirty feet overhead, looped almost double. A waterfall, throwing clouds of spray into the morning sunlight, fell deafeningly on the right.

"Blackpool," explained Gordon laconically. "Another couple of miles, and we shall be in Nuwara Eliya. Most English people, in writing the word, persist in calling it 'Eliza.'"

In the valley on the left there appeared a tea factory, above which, upon the hillside, spread out an expanse of tea bushes losing itself in the skyline. The road rose rapidly, but suddenly it reached the level, and there before them lay the valley, surrounded by mighty wooded hills, amongst which nestles Nuwara Eliya.

"Here we are!" said Gordon, turning the car sharply to the left.

Upon the right was a large expanse of grass land, with a race-stand upon its far side. Behind them, there glistened in the sunlight a small lake. Beside

the road ran the grass-grown race-track, an impenetrable hedge of luxuriant gorse, gorgeous in its yellow blossoms, separating them. Here and there, nestling on the hill sides, were seen the red roofs of bungalows. In the far distance were thickly-wooded hills above the tea bushes, and a little river ran placidly in its winding course towards the lake.

"We have come up about fifteen hundred feet," said Gordon. "Nuwara Eliya is 6,200, and 'Pedro,' that great jungle hill over there, is another 2,000 feet —the highest point in Ceylon."

At the turn of the road an ugly green building, with several gravel tennis courts and grass croquet lawns surrounding it, caught the eye. "The United Club," explained Gordon. "A mixed club where, in the season, the dances are held, and where the ladies can play bridge and tennis, and gossip. The back verandah in the evening is like a beehive. There is a great week here in February when the races are on. It is rather good fun. Most of the Ceylon young women turn up ,and not a few globe-trotters."

"I should love to come to that," cried Cicely enthusiastically.

"You shall, if you don't run away and leave me before then," replied Gordon.

As the car suddenly turned again to the left, there opened out another reach of valley, where golf greens, patching the darker grass around them, were dotted here and there about the plain.

"Oh, how splendid!" exclaimed Cicely.

"This is the best golf course in the East," explained Gordon. "I will show you some more of it afterwards. Here is the Grand Hotel and breakfast, which, for the moment, we need most. I must

spend an hour or two here, and then we will push right on to Kandy, which is a much more interesting place than Nuwara Eliya. We ought to get some shooting when we have finished with Kandy. Come along! Who is hungry?"

Gordon wished to buy some things for their trip at a European shop. There were several in the place, as well as a small native bazaar. After breakfast, therefore, they left the car, and crossed the golf links. "Queen's Cottage," the hill residence of the Governor, rose up above the tree tops overlooking the links. Up the valley, as far as the eye could reach, stretched a vista of green turf quite as good as in England, intersected by a winding stream. Crossing a bridge, they paused for a moment to watch the players 'put' at the twelfth hole.

"I do wish we could have a foursome now," cried Cicely. "I should so like to play up that valley."

"I am afraid you'll not have time now," answered Gordon. "We really must push on. We can easily come up from the estate when we return, and have plenty of games."

The shopping was soon completed, and Gordon hurried them back to the hotel. The road, leading out of the valley over the crest on the skyline, by the Ramboda pass, would take them to Kandy.

The motor, in charge of the Tamil boy, was quite ready. The latter started the engine, curled himself up on to the footboard, and the car was off.

For two miles they again climbed upwards. Then, cresting the ridge, the road wound downwards with equal precipitancy. The narrow brown ribband could be traced for miles below, twisting and twining as only Ceylon roads can do. He would need to be a

careful driver indeed who faced that Ramboda road on a dark night. The view from the summit was superb. Hill and valley, tea factory and planter's bungalow, river and jungle, spread out in vast panorama.

"I have wired for tiffin to be ready at the Ramboda village Rest House. It is only about fourteen miles, but we have to drive very slowly, and we drop some 2,000 feet."

A great country cart loaded with hay suddenly loomed into view. Gordon swerved the car just in time to clear himself, with less than a foot between the near wheels and the *khud* on the left.

Suddenly a body flew off into space, and a wild cry from the rear cleft the air.

Gordon, with a grunt, rammed on the breaks.

"The boy has gone!" cried Mallory excitedly.

As he spoke, a frightened face appeared over the short scrub at the edge of the *khud*.

"Oh, it is Peter, is it? He is always doing it," said Gordon quietly. "He goes to sleep regularly, and then falls off the footboard. He will be killed one of these days."

He called out to the boy in Tamil, and the latter, rubbing his arm, again climbed, without a word, to his seat.

The air grew momentarily warmer. The vegetation as rapidly changed from fir trees, cypresses, and the hardy plants of the hills to sub-tropical varieties. Cocoanut palms, palmyras, and banana plants began to make their appearance. Maidenhair ferns abounded. By the time the car had pulled up in the little village the ladies were glad to discard their coats and to appreciate their white topees.

"There is the Rest House, up those steps," pointed

Gordon. "I hope the keeper has a decent feed for us. Although mostly tinned stuffs, chicken, and curries, the Rest House meals are, as a rule, not bad. You will learn more of them before we have finished. When we leave Kandy and strike out into the jungle, we shall have nothing else to live on. Take away the common domestic chicken from Ceylon, and the country would be as lost as England without bacon and eggs."

"What a delightfully cool verandah!" cried Margaret. "And oh, here again is a punkah! I positively haven't seen one since we left the 'Soudan.' Can we wash?"

"Oh yes, certainly. These houses are quite civilised. They are under Government. You will not find them hotels, but they have clean sheets and towels, and decent bedrooms. One may not occupy a bed more than a few days on end, if anybody else should roll up and ask for it. In India one has to carry one's own bedding. Here, you see, we are more advanced, which is a great blessing for motorists. We could hardly carry five lots of bedding on the car, could we?"

An old Cingalese man hurried from the back premises and seized the ladies' coats.

"Did you get my wire all right, and have you got a good tiffin ready, old man?" called Gordon.

"Yes, master! Soup, salmon, roast chicken, chicken curry, egg curry, sardines, peaches."

"Humph, the usual! Tinned salmon and peaches, and the inevitable chicken."

"Who's afraid?" cried Mallory. "I, for one, feel as if I could eat two chickens and drink a whole bottle of Pilsener as well."

The Rest House keeper was already running to the kitchen. A coolie, lying indolently on his back on the verandah, gently pulled the punkah rope. The hum of insect life arose drowsily from the garden. The perfume of roses and heliotrope filtered upwards. The peace of mid-day held all things living in its sleepy, tropical embrace.

CHAPTER VIII

Gordon and the boy Peter were tinkering the car. Margaret, ensconced in a lounge chair in a corner of the verandah, was discussing Ireland with Jack Mallory. Cicely for awhile meditatively watched Desmond smoking his pipe; then she invited him to escort her for a short tour through Ramboda village.

The village, lying beyond the Rest House, consisted of two lines of native shops, a forge, and a handful of dwellings. The villagers, sitting half asleep over their baskets of betel nuts, rice, peppers, dried fish, native bread, etc., at the doors of their shops, viewed the intruders with lazy interest. The ubiquitous length of smouldering rope hung, for the convenience of smokers, before every second shop front. Here and there a group of naked children, at the sight of strangers, fled to the safety of their huts.

Desmond sauntered beside the girl, listening to her casual remarks, and smoking his pipe in comparative silence. They passed through the one village street, and again entered the open road. A quarter of a mile, or more, further on, a great rock hung like a canopy across the road. They had seen the spot in photographs, and likened it to a great nose.

Having exhausted her conjectures upon the safety of the rocky arch, Cicely relapsed into silence and

leaned against the roadside stone parapet. Presently her eyes shot a glance of inquiry from beneath the broad rim of her white topee at her silent companion. She crossed and uncrossed her feet, and slowly traced a circle in the dust with the point of a brown shoe.

"You are very quiet to-day," she said, tentatively. "What is the matter? Don't you like motoring?"

"Like it immensely, thanks!" answered Cleeve quietly.

Again Cicely's surreptitious glance sought his face. Desmond slowly re-lit his pipe.

"You are very dull," she ventured.

"Am I? I am sorry. I do not feel a bit dull." He slowly drew a deep whiff of smoke and puffed it heavenwards. "There is plenty for me to see, and er—plenty of other people to talk."

A curious ring of harshness in his tone riveted her attention. It wasn't like him to be sarcastic. In this mood, she didn't understand him at all. Her eyes were concealed by her drooping lashes, but the corners of her mobile mouth curled slightly, and the suspicion of a flush rose to her cheeks. She ventured another glance in his direction, but, from that, became no wiser. His lips were uncompromisingly shut. His gaze, straight to his front, told her nothing.

"There is something wrong, I know," she said presently. "I hate to feel that everybody isn't happy." Her voice grew soft and alluring. She moved the fraction of an inch nearer to him. "Tell me, please."

"Humph!"

"Go on, please."

He felt her eyes upon him. Then, turning suddenly,

he faced her. "If I tell you, you will tell me to mind my own business—and quite rightly."

"I won't," she exclaimed indignantly. "How could I when I have asked you?"

"You *promise*?"

"Of course,' she replied firmly, again dropping her eyes.

"Well then, I am disappointed in *you*. You are allowing Jack Mallory to fall in love with you."

Cicely's eyes opened wide. Her face expressed unqualified surprise. She blushed divinely.

"*Allowing*?" she demanded. "What do you mean? Besides, he isn't—"

"Oh yes he is," asserted Desmond unflinchingly, "and you know it. I didn't think you were nothing but an ordinary flirt."

"I'm *not*, Mr. Cleeve," cried Cicely plaintively. "I don't—"

"Yes, you do," interrupted Desmond, hotly, "You may not say anything particular; I know nothing about that. But you allow him to open his soul to you—you look at him as if—" He stammered into inaudibility.

"Well?" demanded Cicely sternly. "As if what?"

Desmond, deliberately, struck a match and tried to light his pipe.

"Look at me, Mr. Cleeve!"

"I won't," he replied uncompromisingly.

"You won't. You are a coward. Why?"

Slowly and reluctantly his eyes met hers. Cicely's half-shaded by her long lashes, luminous and strangely pathetic, held him conquered. He knew that he was worsted before he looked. For an instant

neither spoke. Then, starting with the slightest twitching of the corners of her mouth, and ending in a mischievous twinkle within the depths of her eyes, her face broke into a happy smile. A trill of soft laughter followed.

" You're a goose!' she whispered.

" Humph! It is time we were finding our way back to the car," he said.

As he spoke, the sound of a motor syren echoed through the valley.

" That is Uncle Gerald calling, I expect," cried Cicely. " I suppose we really must hurry. Come along!"

For a few moments they walked in silence. Cicely surreptitiously glanced once or twice at Desmond's rigid figure, but said nothing. But such a situation, as far as she was concerned, could not continue for long. That trace of coquetry which few women worth knowing are without, was never very deeply concealed in Cicely's soul. Her eyes were dangerously expressive. A natural inclination to be nice to everybody added to the danger of trouble. To flirt seriously with any man to his undoing was, however, as contrary to her nature as it would have been to deliberately hurt an animal. Desmond made no pretence of understanding the workings of a woman's mind, but he had divined enough of Cicely's character to believe implicitly in her good intentions. Had he not done so, he would not have ventured to say as much as he had.

Presently a little laugh, half nervous and wholly seductive, broke the strained silence.

"Now that you have had time to ponder so deeply, do you still think me a flirt?" asked Cicely.

Desmond made as if to speak, and then hesitated. Cicely read his state of mind with ease.

"Go on!" she said. "Out with it, please."

"I had no right to speak to you at all," he murmured. "I am sorry. Besides, I may be wrong. You may not have been flirting at all."

"Oh—! You think—?"

The mischievous look in the girl's face had fled instantaneously. As she spoke, there was a thrill in her voice which drew Desmond's gaze upon her flushed countenance with surprise.

For some moments he said nothing. Then—"I don't know what I think," he answered slowly. "It only struck me that if, after all, you were not pretending with Jack Mallory, I had been guilty of gross impertinence. I—"

"Well, for goodness sake, don't get struck like that again," intervened Cicely heartily. "Besides, it makes you so dreadfully dull."

The excited hoot of a motor syren not a hundred yards beyond a turn in the road aroused them to a sense of their surroundings. A moment later, Gordon's Daimler slowly slid into sight.

"Oh, there you are at last," exclaimed Margaret, gaily. "We were considering the necessity of a search party. Mr. Mallory has been looking for you everywhere."

Mallory grunted. Cicely laughed. Desmond followed her into the *tonneau*. The syren wailed across the valley, and the car resumed its steady crawl down the winding road.

The view on the left was extraordinarily magnificent. Every moment brought into sight some fresh panorama, which, for the time, claimed their

undivided attention. To have conversed of anything but scenic effects would have shewn a callousness worthy of a graven image.

At last there appeared the large native town of Gampola. Slowly the car wound its way through the narrow streets of native shops and scuttling children. It was necessary to sound the syren continuously. The indifference of native ears to any sound not immediately upon them is notorious. Hens, dogs, and cows seemed to be attracted to the motor like moths to a candle. A native two-wheeled ekka, drawn by a bull, barged into the mudguard. Peter, from his perch on the step, accelerated a pariah dog with his foot. The shopkeepers, indifferent, indolently glanced from their seats behind their wares. A cripple, doubled up amongst the dust of the roadside, chaunted a sing-song refrain and held out a tin cup for alms. A goat escaped the near front wheel by a miracle.

Beyond Gampola the road ran clear and open. Then came the stone bridge crossing the great river at Peradeniya. A moment later, Gordon pulled up at the Rest House. The entrance to the celebrated Peradeniya Botanical Gardens was close at hand.

Shouting to the Rest House keeper for tea, Gordon ordered a halt. The afternoon was almost gone. Seen in the coolness of early evening, the gardens would be delightful.

They did not spend much time over tea and bread and butter. This Rest House, a favourite haunt of local honeymooners, was cool and inviting, but the four miles of road to Kandy had yet to be accomplished before dark, and there was much to see.

Between the two great palms flanking the entrance-gate of the gardens they wandered through avenues

of beauty, varying at every step. They admired the rubber trees older than any to be seen on the rubber estates they were likely to visit, the great Indian rubber tree with its roots spreading in high buttresses for a circumference of many yards, and the celebrated cotton tree, resplendent with its gorgeous red blossoms.

It was dark before the car again got under way. Before, however, they had reached the Queen's Hotel at Kandy, a full moon was showing itself above the black hill-tops and touching the ripples of the lake with sparks of light. A gentle zephyr of the night breeze, soughing through the tree tops, cooled the air.

"Oh, how perfectly beautiful!" exclaimed Margaret.

"Yes, isn't it?" assented Gordon. "We will come out after dinner and have a good look at it."

The large hotel was practically full of travellers. A touring party from Chicago had arrived that day. Also a German passenger ship, detained at Colombo for a few days, had disgorged its quota of trippers. Anticipating the possibility of being swamped by such tourists, Gordon had secured rooms a week ahead. They were all comfortably tired and hungry after their long day. The dining-room was almost full-up when they appeared and secured their reserved table. Cicely's eyes were dancing with interest at the various strange personalities who at every turn met her gaze. The Americans were decidedly the most remarkable, their openly-expressed opinions of things in general vastly entertaining everybody within earshot.

Mallory had captured a seat next Cicely, but, try as he would, he was unable to monopolise her attention. The girl was unusually silent and pensive.

"When we leave Kandy," said Gordon, "I intend to take you for a night to put up at the bungalow of a friend of mine. He has a rubber estate, and I am sure you would like to see the place. His wife is in England, and he has an enormous stone bungalow near Matale. Bad luck on him being so much alone! He has only been married a couple of years, and his wife cannot stand the climate. Perhaps, if she cared enough, she would find that she would get used to it. Comes of marrying too young." He grunted feelingly. "No girl ought to marry before she is twenty-five."

"Oh," said Cicely. "I wonder what you know about it."

"I don't believe that a girl knows what she wants until she is twenty-five, and not always then," replied Gordon unflinchingly.

Desmond, sitting opposite Cicely, did not fail to catch the challenging look in her eyes. He slowly drained his wine glass. "I quite agree with you, Gordon," he said.

Margaret laughed lightly. "I am afraid, Cicely, that you cannot have impressed your uncle and Desmond with your reliability."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Mallory hotly.

"And may I ask at what age you consider a man has reached reliability?" asked Cicely, with scorn.

"Possibly thirty," replied Gordon.

"Tommy rot!" ejaculated Mallory.

"Now, there I agree with you, Uncle Gerald," cried Cicely. "But boys and—women are very different sorts of people."

"Humph!" grunted Desmond. "A young girl thinks she is in love until she meets the next man. An

older woman knows what she is doing, and what she is giving up when she agrees to marry a man."

"But don't you think," ventured Margaret quietly, "that the older woman may accept a man for many reasons other than love—a wish for a home of her own, for instance—the fact that all her friends are marrying—because the man she really loves married somebody else?"

"There!" exclaimed Cicely triumphantly.

"Still, I would rather that the young girl had her free fling first," said Gordon.

"If she is the sort of girl who needs a fling, yes," agreed Mallory, "but they don't all need that."

"Have you been reading books, Mr. Mallory, or where have you acquired your special knowledge of girls?" asked Cicely.

Desmond meditatively filled his wineglass. Then, as if half unwilling, he sought Cicely's eyes and held them. "I think," said he, "that all girls should be allowed what fling they wish."

For a moment nobody answered. Then, above the clatter of dishes and the babel of the room, arose the strident voice of one of the party from Chicago. Involuntarily his conversation held their attention. "'Mamie,' I said, 'if there was a piece of mistletoe over your head I guess I should kiss you.' 'Oh,' she said, 'what's the matter with the ceiling?' I guess Mamie is fly enough. Don't you worry about Mamie."

Gordon dropped his spoon and broke into convulsive laughter. In another moment the whole table was struggling against hysterical mirth.

"Jolly good!" gurgled Mallory. "Some more, please."

"My Matale friend told me rather an amusing thing that happened to his assistant the other day," said Gordon. "The latter was off home to England. His old servant came to him and said that he wanted to buy a calf of his that was for sale. He was told that it was already sold. Later on, it was found out that the servant had bought the calf from the original purchaser for sixty rupees. His master asked him why he had been such an ass as to pay so much for a calf worth twenty. His answer, given in all seriousness, might by some people be misinterpreted. 'Because,' he said, 'I want something to remember master by. Not seeing master's face, then looking at calf.'"

"I hope his master appreciated the subtlety of the compliment," said Desmond. "Let us have coffee on the verandah, shall we?"

But the beauty of the night soon drew them towards the lake. Gordon led the way with Margaret. Desmond, delaying to find a cigar, was content to follow the others slowly. A shaded avenue bordered the lake, and a stone parapet separated it from the water. Presently he came upon Jack Mallory and Cicely leaning against the parapet. He turned to retrace his steps, but Cicely's voice stayed him.

"What a heavenly night, Mr. Cleeve, isn't it?" she said. "But it is rather cold."

Desmond glanced at her bare arms and thin frock, which appeared to his masculine sight to be composed of nothing but blue chiffon. "I'll get you a coat or something," he said.

"No, Mr. Mallory will, thanks. He knows where my cloak is," she explained, smiling up at Jack who was sitting above her.

Mallory was off in a moment. Then suddenly she turned to Desmond. Her eyes were very soft and demure in the half light, and she watched him furtively as she spoke.

"I hope," she said, "that you are quite satisfied with the result of your morning's lecture."

"*I*—satisfied? Why?" he asked in genuine surprise.

"You heard me snub Mr. Mallory at dinner? Well, I have been snubbing him ever since. I have been perfectly beastly to him. He is thoroughly unhappy now. You object to my being pleasant to people. You see the result."

She nodded her head defiantly. Desmond glanced towards the hotel—Mallory was running up the steps. He made no answer.

"Well?" demanded Cicely impatiently.

"Well what?"

"Say something."

"I will say, if you like, that I am sorry I gave you that lecture," he answered. "I was a brute, and you are heaping coals of fire on my head by pretending that you care so much for my opinion. You are now being a subtle flatterer."

"Good gracious, of what shall I be accused next?" she cried.

"Don't think that I don't like it; I do," he laughed.

"*What!* Flattery from a mere girl?" she exclaimed, with a chuckle. "Now, if I were a woman, I could quite understand."

For a moment Desmond appeared to be studying the stone of the parapet. Cicely was watching him with mischievous interest.

"You need not be more of a woman than you are to

understand," he murmured, half to himself. "I wonder how much you do understand of men?"

Cicely looked over her shoulder, then softly began to hum a song.

"Here is Mr. Mallory As he has gone for my cloak, I must really be nice to him again."

"You simply can't help being nice to everybody," said Desmond. "That's the trouble."

"Thank you, fair sir!" she whispered, curtseying demurely.

CHAPTER IX

THE view of Kandy quite upheld its promise of the night before. It was cool and pleasant in the early morning, and the walk of some three miles round the lake was wonderfully picturesque. From the road running half way up the heights, past nestling bungalows and through vegetation of infinite beauty, they came upon such a variety of views that each one seemed more entrancing than the last. Encircling the lake, the road led downwards to the level again, and a short walk brought them to the walled enclosure, within which is the temple of the Sacred Tooth.

Priests in yellow robes, crippled beggars, vendors of jasmine and oleander flowers, to be used as offerings for the shrine, and native loafers of various descriptions, hung about the entrance. None of them, except Gordon, had ever before seen a Buddhist temple. Reverently they mounted the stone steps beyond the entrance gate. But reverence, such as Europeans know it, did not seem to be at all necessary. Some Cingalese maidens were upon their knees mumbling their prayers, but they did not fail to watch the visitors the while; and the priests seemed to wander about amongst the worshippers without any thought of disturbing the latter's devotions.

A moat surrounded the inner sacred temple. Leading up to this were more steps, until one came to two doors, studded with curious iron-work ornamenta-

tion, and flanked by two elephant tusks on either side. Beyond these was a further flight of narrow steps leading to doors inlaid with silver and ivory.

A priest, with characteristic clean-shaven face and head, opened the doors.

"I hope it is safe?" said Cicely, with a shudder. "Oh, *do* look!"

Upon a table of solid silver could be seen a bell-shaped structure of silver gilt, protected by iron bars. The priest tried to explain, but Gordon, as interpreter, had to come to the rescue.

"That inverted bell thing," he said, "is called a dagaba. It is the same shape as all the Buddhist temples. This, of course, is in miniature, but when we get to the sacred buried city of Anuradhapura you will see some of them as big as St. Paul's in London."

"Steady on, old chap!" guffawed Mallory.

"Quite true!" replied Gordon. "Wait and see! Beneath this little dagaba here are half a dozen smaller ones, all of gold, and studded with precious stones—rubies, emeralds, catseyes, pearls, and all sorts of things. Buddha's tooth itself is in the last one, which is completely covered by rubies, and is only shown at very special festivals. I myself have seen it once. It is suspended by a gold wire, and is larger than any tooth that Buddha, or any other human being, for that matter, ever possessed.

"How nasty!" exclaimed Margaret.

As she spoke, the old priest disclosed the inner dagabas, and Margaret and Cicely inspected the inlaid jewels with considerable awe. Where had they all come from? What wonderful histories could each stone relate, if speech could be given it!

"I believe that the jewels have been given by

various Kandyan kings and chiefs," said Gordon in answer to their thoughts, "The majoritv of them must be very old."

"It is very hard to keep the Tenth Commandment sometimes," sighed Cicely. "I simply love old jewels."

"I don't know how long this temple has been here," continued Gordon. "The books state that Kandy did not become the centre of the Cingalese kingdom until the sixteenth century. When the Cingalese deserted Anuradhapura they tried various places, and then came here. I shouldn't bother to study their history, if I were you. The Portuguese, who at that time were in possession of all the coastline, sent expeditions over and over again to capture Kandy."

"I should have liked to have been with those troops," said Mallory. "Talk of loot—hey, what!"

"You wouldn't have got any," laughed Gordon. "You would have done better in our own army. There were no roads in those days, and, as you see, Kandy is surrounded by hills and jungle which must at that time have been practically impassable to European troops. When the Dutch ousted the Portuguese, they did not attempt to conquer Kandy, but made friends, more or less, with the Kandyan kings. The consequence was that, for over three hundred years, the Kandyan kings held barbaric sway over all this part of the country. When our troops turned up, about the year 1800, there was another story to tell. The Kandyan king of the time was transported to India, and saw Ceylon no more. There is a great religious show outside this temple once a year, and then you see the present so-called Kandyan chiefs—with elephants and jewels, and

all the paraphernalia of their rank—marching in a procession. They have practically no power now—being in that respect not a bit like the Indian princes and rajahs."

"Please ask the old priest where he expects to go to when he dies," said Margaret. "I have been reading a little about the Buddhist faith, but the more I read the more confusing it seems."

"Oh, if you are interested in it, you can get plenty of food for thought at Anuradhapura. That was the first place where Buddhism took root in Ceylon."

"Who was Buddha, anyway?" asked Mallory.

"Good gracious! No wonder your father sent you forth to gain knowledge," intervened Cicely.

"The first Buddha was a son of an Indian chief who lived in the neighbourhood of Benares," explained Gordon, laughing. "His name was Gautama. He founded the religion, and became its apostle and missionary. There have been heaps of Buddhas since then."

"I knew all that, Mr. Mallory," said Cicely glibly. "I read books when I travel."

"Humph! Even parrots can talk," grunted Mallory.

"You wait!" murmured Cicely. "I will pay you out for that."

"I believe," continued Gordon, "that it was sometime about 300 B.C. that the son of an Indian king—Asoka—came to Ceylon and converted the Cingalese king, Tissa. The latter built the sacred city of Anuradhapura in consequence. This became deserted later on, and most of it has only been resurrected from buried oblivion during the last few years."

"Yes," said Margaret, "but I don't in the least

understand why they pray, or why Buddha is appealed to in their prayers. As far as I can see, the principal article of their faith is that existence in this world is nothing but sorrow. After death the soul enters the body of an animal, or, if the dead man has been very good, possibly he gets the body of a man again. After a long and weary series of existences have been gone through, he may have so well worked out his salvation that he becomes a Buddha. But Buddha never seems to get any further. He doesn't seem to cease to exist. Is a Buddha a spirit? Ask him, please."

"Humph!" grunted Gordon. "Have you ever asked questions, when you were a child, concerning our own religion, and been quite satisfied with the answers? I will, however, approach the oracle."

The old priest had been standing, sphinx-like, listening intently to catch some intelligible fragments of the conversation.

Gordon translated as best he could.

The old man's face lit up with interest. Gordon could not easily follow his explanation, but, in time, he managed to collect an answer.

"Yes," he said, "he seems to think that by praying to Buddha the effects of evil spirits can be warded off. Buddha—at all events, one Buddha—seems to be actively potent in the spirit world. I asked him what he expects to be when he dies. He says that he will probably be an animal."

"Ask him if he can possibly become an Englishman in another existence?" said Margaret.

"Or a woman?" cried Cicely.

Gordon turned again to the old man, who was holding out some oleander flowers with which he

wished the ladies to honour the shrine. At Gordon's questions, he shrugged his shoulders, and his wrinkled face broke into a smile.

"He says that it is quite possible for him to be an Englishman, and even a woman, but to be the latter would be a degradation."

"Oh, oh, Miss Rosmead, that's one for you!" chuckled Mallory.

"Pouf!" cried Cicely. "No wonder that a man with his intelligence is a heathen. If he had an atom of sense he would pray continuously that he might become a woman."

"Or a girl," added Desmond.

"Of course! They're the same," said Cicely defiantly.

"Now then, Desmond, don't tease!" intervened Margaret. "We had your views on that subject last night. We have now more interesting things to study. If those are the beliefs of these wretched people, no wonder they regard ultimate happiness as equivalent to total extinction."

"Imagine becoming a rat, for instance!" cried Cicely, shuddering. "Ugh!"

"Come along," said Gordon. "You can continue your Oriental studies another time. I want to get off to Matale before dark."

Giving the old *phongee* some rupees for his temple, they left him, and crossed to the Oriental library. But even Margaret did not feel inclined, that morning, for the study of ancient manuscripts. The Sanskrit characters were scratched upon slips, cut from palmyra leaves, each book consisted of a bundle of these leaves, protected on the outside by wooden slips like the sticks of a large fan.

"I don't suppose there is a love story amongst the lot of them," exclaimed Cicely.

"I don't know so much about that," answered Gordon. "I should think there would be, and probably tragic ones at that. But you mustn't be disappointed. When we get to Trincomalee I will unfold to you a most romantic love story of a Dutch girl who lived there many years ago."

Sauntering back to the hotel, Gordon pointed to a long stone building, with a spacious verandah, situated high up above the road, which he said had been the palace of the old kings, but was now used as the residence of the Government Agent of the province.

"I am not at all sure that I would care to live in a house with that history," remarked Cicely. "Too many ghosts."

"Well, I, for one, shall be fit to join the ranks of the departed if we don't have lunch soon," cried Mallory. "Then I shall come and haunt you dreadfully."

"For goodness' sake, come then and get some food quickly," laughed Cicely, taking his hand and running with him down the road. "You are quite difficult enough to manage in the flesh. As an ethereal being you would be preposterous."

. . . .

It was not until an hour later that the motor syren again awoke the echoes of the street.

Mallory asked to be allowed to drive, but Gordon shook his head decidedly. "Wait a while," he said, "until we find a straight bit of road, and then you can, with pleasure. The sixteen miles from here to Matale is all down-hill, and very tricky."

Gordon's statement was soon proved to be true. The road wound round and round, rapidly descending through miles of rubber trees. The latter were very easily recognisable, as the long spiral cuts in the bark, running in parallel lines, marked every tree of any size. Occasionally the monotony was broken by tea bushes, or the great red pods of cocoa hanging loosely from their low trees.

"You will be able to see them tapping rubber trees to-morrow," said Gordon. "Those spiral marks you see are the result of old, healed-up tappings."

"Do you think rubber has come to stay?" asked Desmond. "I hope so."

"Yes, I think so—decidedly. At the same time, one must not forget that there was once a coffee boom. At one time coffee covered Ceylon. The old coffee days, I am told, were grand days. But the blight came to coffee with a suddenness that almost ruined the island, and a period of poverty followed, which, for a time, was helped out by cultivating cinchona. Then came tea. Now has come rubber. We all know about tea, but what is to be the ultimate future of rubber it would take a cleverer man than I to determine. It looks all serene at present. In spite of the fact that the London public made fools of themselves by unduly booming the shares, and then, like frightened rabbits, unloading at any price, rubber is paying well."

"Glad to hear it," said Mallory. "My father has a lot of shares still, which have dropped something awful. And the old gentleman's language, in consequence, is equally painful to hear."

"The trouble is, that we do not yet know how long a rubber tree will last," continued Gordon. "The latex ceased to flow last summer, when we had a

drought, and preconceived estimates went *phut*, but it is doing all right again now. You will see a factory to-morrow. Jackson, to whose bungalow we are going, has rubber, tea, and cocoa."

It was sunset before the car ran into Matale. The hills of tea, rubber, pepper, cocoa, cinchona, and many other minor commodities rose above the village on all sides. Down in the valley the heat was decidedly oppressive—worse, in fact, than any they had experienced since leaving the Red Sea.

The native life of the bazaar, which still continued to fill the party with never-flagging interest, awoke in its own way to the presence of the motor car. Children fled, pariah dogs barked, and hens and goats and cows did their best, as usual, to get in the way.

Without stopping, Gordon slowly wound his way through the village and out again upon the straight road leading to 'Trinco.' About a mile beyond, however, he suddenly turned off to the left, and, running up a slight incline through a garden, pulled up at the door of a commodious stone bungalow.

A native servant rushed forth at the sound of the horn. His master, he explained, was at the factory, but was expecting them, and all was ready for their arrival.

CHAPTER X.

As Gordon had stated, the bungalow proved more than large enough to hold them all comfortably. The absent Mrs. Jackson, despite what shortcomings she may have possessed, had certainly left a comfortably-furnished bungalow behind her. The climate was, if anything, hotter than Colombo, but there was plenty of water for baths, and soothing punkahs in all the rooms.

The evening was a short one, as everybody was sleepy after a long day. After dinner, their host pressed Margaret to play the piano, and Gordon automatically found himself by her side. It was a dreamy atmosphere. The moon shone brilliantly; tropical trees of every variety were silhouetted against the skyline; frogs croaked incessantly in one steady hum of discordancy; lizards raced upon the verandah walls in pursuit of beetles; the swish of the punkah lulled the senses towards oblivion.

Cicely and Jack Mallory, in long armchairs, were half asleep upon the verandah. Desmond and his host smoked their cheroots in the drawing-room. Margaret softly played Schubert's "Serenade," from which she drifted into one of Chopin's nocturnes. Gordon seemed the only one awake and he, as usual when Margaret played, was quite content to watch the player.

Nine o'clock saw them all in bed. But an hour

after daylight they were again astir. The early morning was passably cool, but they realised, without much telling, that Ceylon has many climates. Gordon's estate was quite a different place to where they were now.

After early tea, their host conducted them out into the rubber lands. Here, the rubber was not interplanted with tea. The tea and cocoa grew on separate acreages. Moving along beneath the shade of five-year-old rubber trees, Mr. Jackson readily explained conditions. His heart was in his work, and he obviously enjoyed dilating upon it.

The coolies were hard at work scoring the trees with iron scarifiers. Beneath each spiral cut at the foot of the tree a little cup was placed, and then the coolie would move on to another tree.

"The rubber latex drips from the wound in the bark until that local source of supply is ended. Then the cut heals up like a cut in one's flesh," explained their host. "One coolie can tap several hundred trees in a day. We require only about one coolie per acre—pretty much the same as for tea. The trees are planted about twenty feet by twenty. At least, that is the latest and best method. The older estates are planted closer, but we are discovering that rubber needs room for its top branches. Of course, the coolies have to weed also. Some people argue that weeding is unnecessary, but that fallacy has by now been pretty well knocked on the head. Also, I do not believe in planting tea amongst the rubber. How much tapping a tree will stand is not yet known—the industry is not quite old enough. We know, however, that it will stand a great deal. We do not begin here on trees under five years old."

"How much does a tree give?" asked Desmond.

"A five-year-old tree will not give more than half a pound a year. We calculate that in its second year it ought to give double that, and double again in the third. For these estimates we must, of course, have rain. No rain, no latex!"

"What about your labour now?" questioned Desmond.

"Oh, that is all right. We have very little sickness. We pay by results. Consequently, a coolie earns half as much again as your tea coolies. Nevertheless, as you know, we are still putting rubber on the market at under tenpence a pound."

Talking as they went, their host led them by a winding path to where a long, low building stood about half a mile from the house. It was growing hotter every moment, but their interest in every yard of what they saw quite made up for the discomfort of walking.

On entering the factory, the place, at first sight, resembled a laundry. Sheets of white material hung about the building like drying clothes.

"Is that rubber?" cried Cicely.

"Yes," repied Jackson. "The latex is collected in buckets from those little cups and brought here. Acetic acid is then added to it to coagulate it. It is then washed, and the water wrung out by putting it through those sort of mangle things. What you see hanging up is the finished *crêpe* rubber. We roll it out here as thin as thick sheets of paper. It is remarkably white, isn't it?"

"It is jolly hot!" groaned Mallory, mopping his face with his hankerchief.

"What does that matter?" laughed Cicely.

"Think of all you are learning. Think how you are pleasing your father."

Their host chuckled. "You soon get used to it," he said. "But I think that it is time for breakfast now. I am sure you will all be glad of something iced to drink. I am lucky here in being so near the railway. Its terminus is at Matale, and my coolie will have arrived from the station with the ice by now. You will not see any more of the railway for some time. From here to Trincomalee there is nothing but one straight road, first through rubber plantations and then virgin jungle."

The swish of the punkahs, and the iced whisky and soda and lemonade, not to mention the breakfast which they found waiting for them, was very welcome. The chairs, with the long arms upon which they could rest their legs and dream amidst the hum of insect life, were very inviting. Margaret, half dozing after breakfast, wondered what such a life would be like when one became used to it. Cicely was thinking of the young wife whose drawing-room they had taken possession of. To live one's whole life there in happiness one would need, as she expressed it to Margaret, "to love the man a lot."

Mr. Jackson, emerging after an interview with the cook, interrupted his guests' day-dreams by announcing that he had invited some twenty friends from the district to come over for that evening, and have a little dance.

"Oh, but I am afraid we must be off this afternoon," said Gordon.

"A dance, did you say?" cried Cicely. "How delightful! Going away without waiting for it, Uncle Gerald! Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"I do hope you will stay, Gordon?" pleaded their host. "I am not often honoured by ladies in my bungalow in these days. I have just been arranging a little supper with my cook."

"Well, of course we'll stay, Mr. Jackson," declared Cicely, with firmness. "Can I help with the supper? I know how to make first rate cider-cup."

"And I will play the piano for you," said Margaret.

"Ripping!" shouted Mallory, jumping to his feet. "What can *I* do?"

"You can stay exactly where you are," answered Desmond, "whilst I assist Miss Cicely to make the cider-cup. Have you any cider, Jackson?"

"Plenty," replied their host, smiling with content. "We will make it a bang-up affair, between us."

Mallory, so surprised at Desmond's unusual claim upon Cicely's society that he was bereft of speech, fell back in his chair and reflectively lit a cigarette.

The required preparations were, after all, very few, and it was just as well, for the guests began to drift in soon after sunset. Their evening clothes, carried in boxes on coolies' heads, followed them. When they had all arrived, they numbered twenty-two, of whom only two were ladies.

There were, apparently, no end of performers on the piano, so Margaret was in no way bound down to sacrifice herself all the evening.

The dinner beforehand was a decidedly gay affair, and the presence of fresh English faces was obviously appreciated to the full.

No time, after dinner, was lost in beginning. The piano, in fact, thumped by an enthusiastic planter to an adaptation of "The Eton boating song,"

summoned them from the table before the coffee had arrived.

"Come along," whispered Desmond to Cicely, slipping his arm about her waist before she had time to answer, "we really must not miss this while you are making up your mind whom you wish to dance with."

Cicely laughed lightly, and the next moment they were waltzing down the verandah, followed by most of the others.

The majority of the men had to dance with each other, but they seemed used to it, and dashed off at a pace which, in that heat, was bound soon to reduce their shirt-fronts to a pulpy mass.

"You didn't learn to waltz like this in your chambers in Lincoln's Inn," whispered Cicely, as Desmond piloted her across the drawing room floor and dexterously avoided two erratic couples.

"Perhaps not," he laughed. "Nor did I often find a partner like you in my chambers, either."

"Often, indeed!" she exclaimed, reversing. "A complimentary person would have left out the word 'often.'"

"Oh, compliments—like sweets—are only really good for little girls," he rètorted, gaily. "A woman only laughs at them."

"Oh, and so I am a woman now, am I?" she asked, as the piano suddenly stopped "This is growing decidedly interesting. Come and sit down. And, oh, do fan me with something, please, or I shall surely melt."

Desmond, looking about him, soon discovered a palmyrá-leaf fan, and, returning to his partner, drew his chair close to hers.

"Yes, you are a woman to-night," he admitted. "Or else I am a boy again. I suppose you realise that you, like all women, are swayed by many moods?"

"What do you mean?" she inquired in surprise.

"I only mean that sometimes you are so deliciously irresponsible, that you live only for the moment, and take what the moment offers. At other times you are surprisingly thoughtful."

"H'm! Now I wonder what that means?"

"It means that I am wondering if a woman ever has any real age," he replied.

"But," she chuckled, "I thought that you had settled that a woman knew her real age when she was twenty-five? Until then, we must—poor things!—drift along as best we can."

"Oh, well," he sighed, "some of you manage to drift very charmingly."

With a crash, the piano broke into a rollicking 'two-step.'

"Are you there, Cicely?" called Gordon from the other end of the verandah. "I want to introduce at least six partners to you."

"Coming, Uncle Gerald," she replied. "Au revoir, Mr. Cleeve."

There were no further interruptions of the music until supper was ready. Dance after dance followed in a steady flow, and the ladies had to divide their dances into halves in order to meet the clamouring of the many men. Collars melted and shirts crumpled long before the evening was half through. Cicely's cider-cup was voted excellent, but gallons of cider-cup could not have properly assuaged the thirst of the dancers.

Lighting his pipe, Desmond slipped into a long chair and gave himself up to reverie. He was beginning to feel a different man since the day he left England. The mental rest had a lot to do with his exhilaration of spirits, without doubt, but he had to admit that it was by no means the whole cause of his newly-awakened delight in life.

He was eventually dragged in to supper by his host, and it was well on into the early hours of the next morning before he, or anybody else, found the way to bed.

It was not until late the next day that most of the guests departed. Where they all slept was a marvel, but they certainly managed somehow.

Gordon's party started at last. Dambulla was only twenty miles further on, but Gordon explained that he intended them to visit the great rock of Sigiri there before dark. "There will be plenty of time to rest at Kantalai," he said. "We can stop there for a couple of days to shoot."

It was almost the hottest time of the day as they at last waved "good-bye" to their host, and rushed down the road, but in the Tropics a motor, on the move, makes its own cooling breeze. The boy Peter complained of fever, but Gordon was used to that. He knew Peter of old. From a leather pocket case he produced quinine tabloids, and Peter was ordered to swallow some on the spot. Native fashion, he preferred to chew them first. That, as Gordon remarked, was his look-out.

The journey to Dambulla, by comparison with the hill country, was deadly dull. Through small villages and plantations they sped in monotonous succession. The road, a military one, had been built to reach its

destination at Trincomalee with as little circumlocution as possible. Civilization disappeared rapidly at every mile. Before they had reached the Rest House, in fact, both sides of the road were enveloped in virgin jungle, and wild animals might be met at any moment. Beyond Dambulla, as Gordon said, this condition of wildness would be still more marked, and rifles and shot guns might be the order of the day at any turn of the road. Their impatience to discard civilization was growing apace. Jack Mallory yearned for bears and cheetahs. Cicely and Margaret wanted to see a crocodile. Gordon laughed, and refused to promise. "You must see Sigiri first, whether you like it or not," he said firmly.

"But who wants to see temples and things?" demanded Mallory. "Do you, Miss Cleeve?"

"It isn't a temple," explained Gordon. "It is a great rock about five hundred feet high. A Cingalese prince fought with his family, and fled there for safety. He raised a protective wall round it, and then built a spiral stairway up its sides and lived on the top. He was a murderer and a rebel, and he ended his days in what he imagined to be good works, in order to propitiate those fates which, in his belief, regulated the soul's transmigration. The view from the top is well worth the climb. For your father's sake, Mallory, I insist upon your seeing it. No Sigiri, no shooting!"

They were expected at the Rest House, and after tea, as in duty bound, they started forth for the great rock. The climb up, by many steps spirally encircling the rock, was not too difficult, and from the top they could see the jungle country for many miles.

The sun was already below the horizon as they

returned. The Rest House was just big enough to hold them all, and should any belated travellers arrive, the verandah chairs would need to be used as beds. As it turned out, no such interruption occurred, so they had the place at their disposal. The Cingalese cook produced a surprisingly good dinner, and from the car Gordon extracted a case of claret and hock. Except for the everlasting hum of insects and the croaking of frogs in many a neighbouring swamp, the night was absolutely still. The world, as they had known it, might as well have been in another planet.

After dinner, they deserted the heat of the common living-room, and sought comfortable spots on the broad verandah. Desmond and Jack Mallory were soon deep in a discussion concerning the merits of various rifles. Gordon was leaning over the far end of the verandah with Margaret.

Cicely, for a wonder, was for the moment, alone. She seemed to be pondering over something more than usually difficult of solution. Her eyes were very thoughtful; her hands lay idly in her lap; she didn't stir.

Suddenly, seemingly within a few yards of the bungalow, there burst upon the night a shrill screaming as of wild devils in agony. Everybody, except Gordon, sprang up in alarm.

"It is only jackals," said Gordon quietly. "You hear them every night in these parts. I expect they are on the look out for the villagers' hens."

Mallory, in his excitement, had run out into the compound. Cicely slowly crossed the verandah and, joining Desmond, leaned upon the rail by his side and looked out into the night.

"And so," she said presently, "you think that girls should have what you call their fling?"

Desmond started up. The question, so apparently irrelevant, found him hopelessly unready with an answer.

"I suppose, having their fling means flirting, doesn't it?" she continued.

"Humph! I suppose it does, in a way," he admitted reluctantly.

Cicely laughed softly. She looked very bewitching as she rested her elbows on the rail in the half light of the verandah. With her chin upon her hands, she raised her eyelashes quickly and looked up into Desmond's perplexed face. Within her eyes was a coquettish gleam of mischief which he knew meant trouble for him.

"Don't you change your opinions rather suddenly, Mr. Cleeve?" she asked sweetly.

"Perhaps I do," he replied. "That comes of associating with you. To tell you a secret, do you know that lately I have begun to doubt whether I really know anything about girls at all."

"Oh! Now I wonder what you mean by that? You are not usually so humble."

"I only mean what I say," he explained.

"I think men are often much more difficult."

"The whole world seems difficult sometimes," he replied uncommittingly.

Cicely's mouth puckered with indecision. For a moment she studied his face, and then impatiently stamped her foot on the verandah.

"I *do* wish you wouldn't be so exasperating—or is it clever? I never pretend to be clever." Her voice changed to dangerous plaintiveness. "Please explain.

I haven't flirted one little bit for two days, and I need advice. Do you think I ought? Is that the way you think I should get through my fling?"

"I think you should be allowed to do as you like," answered Desmond.

"But you said I wasn't to flirt with Mr. Mallory, didn't you? You called me—well—all sorts of names at Kandy."

"I didn't!" denied Desmond firmly.

"Well, you hinted at them anyway."

"Not even hinted—not in earnest. In any case, I said I was sorry. I say I think you should do as you like, because I am quite sure that you would not like to hurt anybody intentionally. Why I said what I did was merely to warn you that you might be unconsciously hurting somebody."

"And you now think then, that, as you have warned me, I may flirt with anybody—even Mr. Mallory?"

"Yes."

"Why?" she questioned in surprise.

"Because I trust you—more even, I imagine, than you trust yourself," replied Desmond seriously.

For a few moments Cicely studied the distant skyline. The stars were very bright, and the edge of the moon was just rising above the tree tops. Desmond watched her silently.

"You are very sure of me," she said softly.

"Yes, I am quite sure," he answered.

"I wish you wouldn't—trust me so much," she whispered half to herself.

Desmond laughed lightly. "And why not?" he questioned.

Cicely's eyes raised themselves to his. Her words

came very slowly, and in their utterance was a tone of seriousness unusual to her.

"Because I hate disappointing people," she said. "And I may—"

"But you won't!" he interrupted.

Cicely gravely shook her head. For a moment there was silence. Then she slowly broke into a merry ripple of laughter.

"It looks, then, as if this girl will have to put off her fling until some later day, doesn't it?" she said. Then, looking up demurely at Desmond's thoughtful face, she added, "There isn't anybody to flirt with but Mr. Mallory, is there?"

Desmond's countenance expressed amusement. The air of innocence upon Cicely's upturned face was most diverting.

"Well," he said quietly, "it depends upon who you call anybody. Of course your uncle is out of it. And I—well—I have forgotten how, even if you cared to try me."

"By Jupiter," exclaimed Mallory, stalking across the verandah, "I wish I could get a shot at some of those devils. I shall get ready for them to-morrow with a rifle."

Cicely, smiling, apparently at her own thoughts, turned towards the bungalow.

"Good night all!" she said. "Pleasant dreams."

Desmond and Mallory, leaning over the verandah, remained for some time smoking. Then they retired within.

Desmond, whistling softly, slowly undressed, garbed himself in pyjamas, and slipped beneath the mosquito curtain. He was not used to the heat of the plains, and hardly expected to sleep. The air was

very still, and a sickly heavy odour of flowers drifted in through the open door.

However, just as he thought he was dropping off to sleep, he received a shock which made his heart lose one beat at least.

A gun had been discharged in the next room!

In a bound he reached the floor, and, with trembling fingers, groped for the matches. The next moment, holding a lighted candle aloft, he stood on the threshold of Jack Mallory's room. Then frightened cries from Margaret and Cicely were followed by the advent of Gordon on the verandah.

Except for the moonlight the room was in darkness, but Mallory, a gun still in his hand, could be seen, with his back to the door, kneeling upon his bed.

"What has happened?" gasped Desmond running into the room.

"Look out, old fellow, for Heaven's sake! I think he is dead, but I am not sure. Wait a moment until I see if he moves!"

"Where. What?" cried Gordon.

"Why, a cobra," replied Mallory more quietly. "I think I have killed him, but I would not be certain yet."

Desmond and Gordon involuntarily hesitated.

"He isn't moving," explained Mallory. "I saw him coiled up on the matting in the moonlight behind my bed. Luckily, Peter had left the guns near the door, so I slipped out of bed, rammed in a cartridge, and let him have the contents before he had time to cause any trouble."

Desmond, realising that danger from a snake which had received a charge of shot at a ten foot range must now be past, bodily advanced with the candle.

Suddenly he stopped, held the candle above his head, glared at the now clearly-defined coil at his feet, and burst into a roar of laughter.

"My dear Mallory," he said, "your cobra is dead enough. You can safely come off the bed. I will run and tell the girls that you are still alive, and that they can go to sleep once more. They must be half frightened out of their wits."

"Good Heavens!" stammered Mallory. "Nothing but a piece of rope, as I am a sinner!"

"Yes, it certainly does look like it, doesn't it?" remarked Gordon, drily. "In fact, it looks uncommonly like the piece of rope that Peter uses to tie up the gun cases with."

"The girls have dissolved into laughter, so all is well," guffawed Desmond, returning.

"Oh, what an ass I feel," groaned Mallory. "And what a heap of apologies I owe you all."

"Oh, well, Mallory, I am sure that our anger is tempered considerably by compassion," answered Desmond. "A man who sees snakes is in a bad way, my boy. I once heard of a Scotsman who used to see flying Findon haddocks, but *he* was somewhat alcoholic. Good night!"

"Good night!" added Gordon. "Go to sleep and forget it!"

"Oh, what an unmitigated ass I was," groaned Mallory, burying his head in his pillow.

CHAPTER XI

The road from Dambulla to Kantalai Lake is, under ordinary circumstances, rather a dull stretch. Except for some small *jheels* near Dambulla, where snipe may be found, the road leads for most of the forty odd miles through practically virgin jungle. There is a small Rest House and a tiny village or two, but except for the interest obtained by seeing the spoor of elephants or the sight of a bear, pig, or leopard, the journey grows monotonous.

With Jack Mallory at the steering wheel, however, there was no room for sleepy monotony. Jack had claimed Gordon's promise that he should drive when the road became easy. The ladies and Desmond occupied the *tonneau*. Peter hung on with all the strength of one leg and an arm to the footboard, and Gordon sat beside the driver.

It was soon obvious that Jack's powers were limited. To this defect was added a culpable want of attention to his duties which soon proved most alarming. To all suggestions that he should retire from the honoured post he gave no heed. If a mere bird suddenly flew across the road his eyes and hands were everywhere except with the steering wheel, and a lurch of the car would follow which certainly allowed of no sleep.

For twenty miles or so, the car sped gaily onwards. For the previous few minutes Gordon had been lulled

into a sense of safety by a marked improvement on Mallory's part. But there is inevitably a calm before a storm. The road at that point ran as straight as an arrow for a couple of miles. Half way down this stretch there appeared a dark object moving towards them.

"There is a water buffalo, probably a tame one," said Gordon. "Blow your horn!"

Jack obediently blew as directed. But had he known more of the ways of the water buffalo his expectations of any practical result following upon his repeated hootings would have been more modest.

Slowly the great beast, its black skin shining in the sun like tanned leather, raised his head and glanced at the car; as slowly he threw back his horns and sauntered towards it; then paused and gazed. There was room at the side of the road to pass. Before Gordon could stop him, Mallory let go the brakes, and the car sprang forward at the rate of thirty miles an hour.

That being the exact moment chosen by the buffalo to recross the road, the off wheel struck him on the hind quarters with the thud of an ironclad.

Mallory had no time to ram down the brakes. He didn't even realize the necessity for holding the steering wheel with all his strength. The great beast didn't even fall, but the car, swerving at almost right angles, rushed, unchecked, off the road, down six feet of bank, and pulled up, snorting impotently, amidst dense brushwood.

The buffalo, dangling one hind leg, remained standing in the road watching with wonder-struck eyes the strange thing that had hit him. Peter, rubbing his nether parts, and in tears, rose slowly from the

road, cursed the buffalo in some unknown tongue, and limped painfully after the car.

The whole affair had been so sudden that there had been no time for alarm. Everybody, except Peter, still sat in their seats. Around them, and above, rose impenetrable jungle. The engine raced madly, but the car was jambed tight.

Gordon leaned across and stopped the engine.

"Anything wrong, Peter?" he shouted.

"Poor Peter has hurt himself, I'm afraid," answered Margaret. "He fell off in the road."

But Peter had already limped round to the front of the car and was crawling about on his hands and knees.

"Mudguard smashed and one tyre gone burst, Master," groaned he.

"Humph!" grunted Gordon. "If that is all, we have been lucky. We must set to work at once and put on our spare wheel. Lucky we have some emergency rations with us, for I fear there is no hope of our seeing Kantalai for many hours yet."

"I am dreadfully sorry," apologised Mallory. "I thought there was heaps of room to pass the brute. Ugh! I'd like to shoot the black devil."

The situation was decidedly annoying, but, after all, there was little damage done, and nobody hurt. Presently Cicely broke into laughter. Mallory's lugubrious face had started her off, and the others caught the infection. Even Gordon saw the ridiculous side of the episode, and chuckled between groans.

The men immediately set to with a will to unload the car of everything. To replace the injured wheel would not be difficult, but to get the car back on the road would be a much more serious matter. Whilst Gordon

and Peter laboured at the wheel, the others unpacked the food box and tea basket, and prepared tiffin. Biscuits, tinned tongue, cheese, and wine there were in plenty, and there was also a box of soda water.

Lunch was ready long before the repairs to the car were completed. Birds of gay plumage fluttered amongst the branches overhead. Chameleons and green lizards of all shades of colour rushed through the scrub. Margaret, who had wandered towards the road, suddenly began to gesticulate excitedly.

"Oh, do come and look!" she cried.

From overhead was heard a wild chattering. From tree to tree a whole herd of monkeys were springing and calling to one another. From a branch overhanging the road, not a hundred yards away, they dropped to the ground as if playing a game of follow-my-leader. Here and there a baby monkey, with its arms about its mother's back, hung beneath the latter as she jumped thirty feet to the road. Peter, with a grin, sounded the syren. In an instant the whole herd was scampering, helter-skelter, down the middle of the road, and disappeared into the jungle.

By the time tiffin was eaten and the car ready, it was past three o'clock. The task of running the car up the steep incline to the road was now attempted. With a man upon each wheel, and the engine at its best, they heaved and sweated until exhaustion overcame them utterly.

For about half-way up the bank the car went beautifully, but there it stuck. Desmond and Mallory had never until then realized what perspiration in the Tropics could mean. With the aid of levers and brute force they at last gained, inch by inch, another foot. Then, whilst the others were drinking soda water with

unquenchable thirst, Peter cut away the bank. Another mighty heave, altogether, and the deed was done.

It was by that time within an hour of sunset. Rapidly they loaded the car again with the impedimenta, and Gordon took the wheel. Desmond loaded a rifle, and occupied the other front seat, Mallory being brutally informed that he was considered safer in the *tonneau*. The prospect of getting a shot at something before dark was very probable.

Amidst the shadows of the jungle the narrow road rapidly darkened. The sunset effects, illumining the narrow streak of heavens visible between the tree lines, were indescribably wonderful. Then, with almost the rapidity of a descending curtain, the darkness fell.

Peter slipped down and lit the acetylene lamps. The great cones of light appeared strangely weird in that silent jungle. Never could they have imagined such a scene. It seemed like the gigantic limelight of a theatre directed upon the forest of the "Babes in the Wood" or "The Sleeping Beauty."

"Keep your eyes open and you may see something," said Gordon. "This part of the country is alive with big game, and they often become attracted by the light."

He had hardly spoken, when, across the road, slunk what, in the distance, looked like a great cat. It paused in the light as if dazed, and then cantered away straight before them, not two hundred yards in front of the car.

"Quick!" whispered Gordon. "It's a panther. Put a bullet into him if you can."

Cicely and Margaret were too excited to speak, and Mallory, his sporting instincts at fullest tension, ceased to breathe. But Desmond was quite ready. With a steady aim, he fired.

The panther, with a wild bound, sprang forward. Mallory gave a whoop of delight. But his joy was premature, for the next instant the animal disappeared into the shadows.

They stopped the car at the spot, and searched with one of the lamps for some distance. Of tracks of blood there were plenty, but not a further sign of the panther was to be seen. Mallory, seizing a rifle, was prepared to track the animal by means of one of the lamps through the jungle, but Gordon would have none of it.

"Oh dear!" sighed Margaret. "I felt for a few minutes as if I was in the Zoo with all the tiger cages open!"

"I was too excited to think at all," cried Cicely. "I do hope we will see something else. What a shame you didn't get him, Mr. Cleeve. What a splendid trophy his skin would have made."

The car resumed its journey, and for some time there was comparative silence. After the recent experience, everybody was on the *qui vive*, watching the long streaks of light with staring eyes.

The road turned slightly. Gordon slowed down. "I don't like running too fast in the dark. One may come across another buffalo or something," said he, blowing the horn. "What is that black thing now?—on the edge of the road—it looks like a cow."

Slowly they drew nearer. The horn had certainly been heard by the beast, whatever it was, but it seemed to be not in the least intimidated. When

the car had approached to within less than a couple of hundred yards it lolloped into the light.

Instantly Gordon pulled the car to a standstill.

"By Jove!" he explained. "A good old brown bear! We seem to be in wonderful luck to-night."

"There are two of them," whispered Desmond. "Shall I fire?"

"No, wait a moment. Wait until both of them are in the light. Bears are never frightened by motor horns one little bit. They won't run yet."

"They are sitting on their haunches looking at us," whispered Mallory.

"I rather think they are coming to inspect us," laughed Gordon softly. "Give me that other rifle, Mallory."

The bears nonchalantly wandered up the road. Curiosity and a natural tendency to keep within the zone of light made them an easy prey.

Together, Desmond and Gordon took aim, waiting until the lolloping animals were within less than a hundred yards.

Almost simultaneously their shots rang out.

The bigger of the two, hit by Desmond's shot, rolled over in the middle of the road and lay like a great furry log of wood. The other seemed to pause in indecision, and then, with a roar, rushed straight at the car.

Margaret gave a little scream of alarm. But the danger was slight. Against two rifles the clumsy beast had no chance. Gordon fired his second barrel, and Bruin fell forward on his face without a struggle.

The work of strapping the two heavy carcasses upon the luggage behind was soon accomplished. The coats of the bears were in excellent condition.

The men were delighted with their success, and the ladies had experienced an adventure in which they had never dreamed of participating.

"There will be a bear skin for your drawing-room, Miss Cleeve," said Gordon. "And if you are good, Cicely, I have no doubt that Mr. Cleeve will give you the other."

"In that case it is mine already," said Cicely, promptly. "My goodness is beyond dispute."

"Humph! We'll see," replied Gordon as he freed the brakes. "I shall be the judge."

Desmond laughed.

"Good intentions are half the battle," he replied. "The skin is yours."

"Thank you," she answered. "I like people to read my thoughts—*some* people."

"I wish I could read them," whispered Mallory.

"I said *some* people, not all people," she retorted severely.

Mallory, retreating into his shell, grunted to himself. A few minutes later the great lake of Kantalai appeared on their left. There was no moon as yet, but, after the many hours in the depths of the jungle, its broad watery expanse was most refreshing to the eye.

A great wall of granite, shaded by trees and covered with vegetation, ran for a mile on the left of the road. This bund, built in the year 275 A.D., by a Cingalese king, forming, as it did, the first link in a great system of irrigation, is still one of the wonders of Ceylon.

The prospect of duck and snipe shooting, which this lake of twenty miles in circumference promised for the morrow, had raised Mallory's spirits to fever

pitch. For the last mile before the Rest House was reached he was irrepressible, and even Cicely's stern remarks were of no avail in squashing him.

The Rest House keeper, having been warned by wire, had been expecting the party for an hour past. The bedrooms and great living-room opened on to a broad stone verandah facing the lake, and the view across the water was superb.

Their meal that evening was gayer even than usual. The events of the day had been varied and exciting. Dangers passed in safety had but added to the zest of enjoyment. Gordon declared that "bubbly wine" must be drunk to the health of the mighty hunters who had killed the bears. As there was a case of champagne in the car, that duty was easily performed, and after their fatigues everybody felt the better for it.

"There is one thing that you must be careful about here," said Gordon. "You must sleep under mosquito curtains. Being so near the lake, this place is alive with mosquitos. And you ladies will do well to either wear two pairs of stockings, or put paper beneath your stockings. Mosquitos cannot get through double stockings as a rule, because to do so the proboscis must turn a corner, which it cannot easily do. Nor can they get through paper. You will soon have no ankles left if you don't do something. Besides, I don't want you to get malaria, which I suppose you know is given you by the bite of a certain kind of mosquito. That reminds me, Jackson yesterday told me an amusing tale of a planter, near him, who has been giving his coolies preventive doses of quinine. It appears that as he doled out the weekly pay to his coolies he handed

each man a quinine tabloid, which he was obliged to swallow. As he paid out the money, he was so occupied with counting the coins that he didn't bother to look at the men as they filed before him. Later in the day, one of the coolies was taken seriously ill, and was so collapsed that the nearest district doctor was sent for. On being asked what he had given the man, the planter replied that he had only given him five grains of quinine. The doctor couldn't believe it, and, after resuscitating the coolie with great difficulty, he questioned the latter. It appeared that the coolie had been asked by ten others to collect their pay for them, and, in order not to offend the peculiar wishes of 'master,' had swallowed his ten doses of quinine like a hero."

"Ripping!" cried Mallory.

"You have learned a lot to-day, Mr. Mallory," said Cicely. "I am sure your father will be delighted with you when you return home."

"That won't be yet, anyway," retorted Mallory, finishing his champagne. "This life suits me down to the ground."

"Well," said Margaret, suppressing a yawn, "I, for one, intend to have a late morning in bed to-morrow. I suppose you will all be out after duck, or something, before we see you again."

"I have told the Rest House keeper to call us men at six," said Gordon. "So I advise bed at once."

CHAPTER XII

When Cicely sauntered on to the verandah in the cool of the morning, the shooting party had already been gone an hour. Margaret was still in bed.

A native boat, a couple of miles away, nearing the far side of the lake, was the only sign of human habitation within sight. Cicely, dangling her pith topee from her arm, shaded her eyes with her hand and watched the boat. Presently, a puff of smoke shot forth from the latter, and the echo of a shot reached her. She rather wished she had gone with the boat. Evidently they were already amongst the duck.

There was scarcely a cloud in the sky. A faint breeze, here and there, caught the glassy surface of the lake. The *bund*, lined with trees, which they had passed the night before, ran along on the left as far as she could see. From where she stood no road was visible. The Rest House, situated twenty feet above the lake, commanded a view that would have served as a setting for fairy land. No sound but the twittering of tiny birds and the plaintive cries of teal rising from the lake disturbed the hum of the jungle.

Dressed in a white shirt and collar, and a white drill skirt with blue tie and waistband, the girl looked as dainty and fresh as the morning itself. Smiling with enjoyment of her surroundings, she picked up a novel, and wandered towards a great rock which rose from the fringe of

the lake. Beneath the branches of a tamarind tree she chose a place in a cleft of the rock from where she could keep the boat in view.

For a long time the unheeded book lay open on her lap. The atmosphere was momentarily growing warmer, but now and again the breeze from off the water indolently rustled the leaves overhead. Two lizards, shimmeringly green, chased one another up the tree trunk. A brace of blue rock pigeons fled wildly lakewards. Behind the bungalow, she caught a glimpse of a dozen chattering coolies. They were just starting off, with their customary half-running gait, beneath the burdens of the carcasses of the bears. The latter were to be skinned at Trincomalee, and the skins sent back to Gordon's estate.

The book, which was a specially interesting one, at last claimed her attention. For half an hour or more she was so enthralled that she started up in surprise as Jack Mallory's voice called to her from the lake. His boat was already quite near the landing rock.

"Hullo! You are back very soon," cried she. "Where are the others?"

"I've come back so as to fire upon those flocks of teal you see out there, and drive them across to the others. They are all settling on this side, and our only decent chance is to get them between two fires."

He sprang from the little dug-out, and, climbing the rock, threw himself at her feet.

"But I thought you had come back to chivvy the teal," she said, presently.

Mallory stretched his long legs, slowly wiped his heated forehead, and glanced up at her face.

"So I am," he answered. "There is no hurry."

"Oh," murmured Cicely, apparently resuming her reading.

"Mayn't I talk for a little while?" he asked humbly.

For a few moments she softly hummed a tune. Mallory, content to study her profile and catch glances of her eyes beneath her lashes, waited patiently.

"Wouldn't you like to be able to write a book?" she asked, looking up at last. "Just imagine if one could portray a place like this on paper so that other people could see it. Think of the difference between this sunny scene and a London fog, for instance! I dare say there is a fog in London now. Thoughts come into my head that I should love to write down, if I only knew how to express them. Don't you feel like that, ever?"

"M'yes, sometimes," admitted Jack doubtfully. Then his face brightened, and he looked admiringly at Cicely's figure leaning against the tree trunk. "I think I would rather be an artist. I would paint you sitting as you are now." He hesitated, and his face flushed. "You can't imagine how ripping you look this morning."

Cicely's eyes danced with mischievous laughter. She looked up enquiringly from a study of her fingers, but, as she caught his ardent gaze, her eyes again fell.

"I wonder," said she thoughtfully, "how many other girls you have said the same sort of thing to."

"I never did—not in earnest, at all events," asserted Mallory heatedly. "I never meant—"

Cicely sprang hurriedly to her feet and laughed

lightly. "What does it matter, anyhow?" she cried. "Come and scare those teal. Look! The lake is full of them, quite close to shore."

Mallory reluctantly climbed to his feet. Cicely was already a dozen yards away. He picked up his gun and followed her along the bund.

"You will never reach those with a shot gun, will you?" she asked.

"I can with a rifle. I'll get one from the Rest House."

From a point, a hundred yards further along, a clean shot at the floating duck would be an easy matter. Cicely seated herself upon a convenient log and waited. In half a minute Mallory followed her.

"I never did—really," continued he.

"Quick!" whispered Cicely, ignoring his remark. "You'll catch them beautifully now, and there is the boat across the lake waiting for you to begin."

Mallory grunted, but loaded the double-barrelled rifle automatically. To continue his argument just then was palpably impossible. Lying behind the log, he took careful aim and fired. The bullet hit the water within a few yards on the near side of the teal. With a frightened screeching, the flock of a hundred birds rose and sailed towards the far side of the lake. Four shots in rapid succession burst from Desmond and Gordon in the boat. The duck at once circled and returned to their original rendezvous amidst some weeds.

"Fire again!" cried Cicely excitedly.

"Would *you* like to?" asked Mallory.

"Yes, rather! I have never fired a rifle, but I would like to immensely. May I?"

"Yes, here you are. Lie down here and rest the

rifle on the log. I have already sighted it. Aim this side of them, and hold the rifle tight to your shoulder, so that it doesn't kick and hurt you."

Cicely followed his directions with alacrity. Sitting beside her, he shewed her how to hold her hands, his eyes following every movement.

She hurriedly pulled the trigger. The bullet flew high, but the birds sailed away just the same. Cicely's eyes shone with delight.

"Do let me try again," cried she.

"I must get some more cartridges first. But in any case there is no hurry," replied he. "I want to say that what I told you just now was quite different."

"Oh, do look at that thing like a log moving out there! What is it?" interrupted she.

"Oh, only a log, I expect," he answered, impatiently. "Look here, Miss Rosmead, you *must* listen to me. I must explain."

Cicely's eyes opened widely. She leaned on her elbow and surveyed Mallory's heated countenance with surprise. Her mouth quivered suspiciously, but for a second only.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "Haven't I been attentively listening to every word for the last half hour? What is it now?"

Upon Mallory's face there was no vestige of amusement. His eyes dropped, but determination filled his voice. Cicely, beneath her lashes, watched him furtively.

"You accuse me of being insincere and—er—it isn't fair," he mumbled.

"Oh I dare say you are sincere enough for the moment," admitted Cicely. "A little flirtation now and again is good for boys, I suppose." She paused,

and meditatively discharged the empty cartridge case from the rifle. " But as I have given up flirting for —oh—quite a long time now, I am afraid I was not—well—particularly interested. I am sorry if I appeared rude."

" Oh, but look here, Miss Cicely—you know that isn't fair. I have never flirted with you. To flirt means to merely play at being in love. I never meant to play at all. I— "

" Oh, there it is again, moving," cried Cicely, springing up. " Do run and get some more cartridges."

" Damn! " ejaculated Mallory beneath his breath. He rose slowly to his feet and turned towards the bungalow.

Cicely's lips quivered humorously. The Rest House keeper appeared on the verandah, and pointing indolently at the floating, log-like animal in the water, laconically muttered—" Crocodile."

In another minute Mallory reappeared, and with him Margaret.

" Good morning, Meg! " called Cicely. " Come and see me shoot a crocodile! "

The crocodile's snout could be seen, just above the water, slowly swimming towards the shore. Except for the movement, it looked exactly like a dark log.

" If you hit him, you'll never get him," said Mallory dejectedly. " The Rest House man says they always sink to the bottom."

Insisting upon loading the rifle herself, Cicely took steady aim and fired. The bullet struck the water close to the beast. He was not even hit, but he sank like a stone, and did not show himself again.

"Here comes the boat," said Margaret, "and breakfast is ready."

Together, they went down the rock to meet the boat. Mallory was distinctly glum. Even Margaret, who could only guess at a reason, failed to elicit more than monosyllabic answers to her remarks. Cicely, sublimely unconscious of any rift within the serenity of her usual surroundings, softly whistled a catchy air from "The Arcadians" and, arm in arm with Margaret, met the boat.

"Seven brace of teal, four brace of pigeon, and a dozen brace of snipe," announced Gordon. "We captured the latter in a *jheel* across the lake."

"I want a whisky and soda," grunted Desmond. "And that right quickly."

"Come along then," cried Cicely gaily. "I'll get it for you. The least that we poor women can do is to serve the wants of the mighty hunters on their return from the chase. I am quite proud of myself this morning. Mr. Mallory taught me to shoot with a rifle. I frightened at least one hundred ducks, and one huge crocodile."

Desmond picked up his gun, slung half a dozen brace of teal across his shoulder, and, as he stepped ashore and his glance met hers, he smiled unconsciously.

"You don't look as if you would willingly frighten even a crocodile," said he. Walking by her side, he slowly led the way towards the bungalow. "You look this morning—" he hesitated, and then suddenly relapsed into silence.

"Well?" asked Cicely.

"Nothing," he murmured lamely.

"It is rude to refuse to answer a lady," she insisted with a *moue*.

"Well, if you must know, I was on the point of saying that you were looking—particularly charming this morning."

Cicely's eyes opened in wonder. "Good gracious! A compliment—from you—you, who have forgotten how to flirt." She laughed merrily. "I am sure you must be over-tired, or something. Do come and have that whisky and soda. But—" she hesitated —"thank you all the same. Little girls sometimes like compliments, even from staid old men."

"I will remember, for future reference," replied Desmond with a smile.

CHAPTER XIII

After tiffin, Mallory, who had managed to find a guide, elected to go across the lake in search of big game. The fact that he would be entirely alone seemed to please him. It was not natural to him to court solitude, but it was quite obvious to all who cared to read that his mind was by no means in its normal state. Both Gordon and Desmond refused to join him, and advised snipe; but he wouldn't listen.

When the afternoon had grown somewhat cooler, the others departed down the road in the direction of some marshes which they had noticed as they arrived the day before. Cicely, having become possessed of the spirit of sport, bemoaned her lct loudly. In the clothes at her disposal, Gordon absolutely refused to allow her to wade with him through the mud and water after snipe. Margaret and she, therefore, had to content themselves with watching from the dry 'vantage ground of the cart road.

There was no lack of sport. Both Gordon and Desmond were excellent shots, and for a time their guns levied death almost as fast as they could load them. The two coolies that they had brought from the Rest House were kept hard pressed, up to their waists in water, recovering the birds as they fell. Desmond, who had been accustomed to snipe shooting in Ireland, was astonished at the comparative ease with which he could bring down his birds.

It was almost dark when they reached the bungalow

again. Mallory had not yet returned. The men refused to wait dinner for him. But thev had hardly sat down to the meal before a sing-song of coolies and a loud shout from Mallory brought them hurriedly to the verandah.

Mallory's beautiful up-to-date shooting suit was caked with mud, and he was tired to death. But, amidst the excited account of his adventures which he poured into his ears, they gathered that he had shot a bear, face to face, and was as happy as a hunter could possibly be. The coolies deposited the great carcass upon the verandah for inspection. It was a good size, and the coat was long and thick.

"There!" exclaimed Jack proudly. "So now, Miss Rosmead, you shall have your skin, whether you are good or not. You can defy your uncle with impunity."

"Oh, but I couldn't," said Cicely hastily. "Besides, I feel quite sure of getting Mr. Cleeve's, you see. The conditions are so very easy." Her eyes softened and a strange air of shyness seemed to possess her "It is very good of you to offer it to me all the same, Mr. Mallory. Thank you so much!"

When Cicely was overcome by what Margaret described as "a sweetly polite earnestness," her eyes assumed such a pathetic appeal that the latter said she always longed to hug her. Presumably it was the same sensation as is produced in the heart of a woman who, upon seeing a particularly delightful baby, rushes upon it and kisses it enthusiastically.

It was plainly apparent that Cicely was anxious to avoid hurting Jack's feelings, whilst at the same time she did not wish to accept his offering of devotion. Self-possessed as she usually was, there were moments

when she was so painfully afflicted by a sense of shyness that words failed her. Desmond, who had been silently absorbing the little scene, thought that he had never seen her look more adorable.

"Now then, you two," called Gordon from within. "When you have finished wrangling, perhaps you will come to dinner."

Jack's spirits had suddenly dropped to zero, and he silently marched off to wash. The others resumed their interrupted meal.

The subject of the bearskin was not referred to again that night. Desmond led the conversation towards Trinco', where they were due by tiffin time on the morrow.

"Can we get some sort of sail boat there, Gordon?" he asked. "Because I intend to explore the harbour, if it is feasible."

"Yes," replied Gordon, "I think I can promise you that. I suppose you know that it is one of the first five harbours in the world. There is splendid fishing, too. I wish the pearl fishery was on in Ceylon this year, but it has been closed for several years now. It is carried on at a place on the west coast, but at present the place would be quite deserted, and not worth a visit. When, however, the news goes forth that there is to be a fishery, it wakes up with wonderful rapidity. Some of the divers come from as far off as the Persian Gulf. The fishery is now leased from the Ceylon Government by a company. People go there for the few weeks of the fishery, and build, or hire at enormous rates, huts to live in. Small private syndicates from Colombo invest a sum of rupees, which is generally entrusted to one of their number who has decided to visit the scene of action. The

divers' boats go out each day, and the oysters are brought up in thousands. These are taken ashore, piled into heaps, and auctioned there and then. You can buy a thousand oysters for a few rupees. The oysters are allowed to rot, and the purchasers may score a good haul of pearls,—or nothing! The smell of the rotting oysters is not exactly like attar of roses. I have never had a shot myself, but I am informed that small syndicates generally manage to save themselves, even if they don't make anything. The pearls, when found, can be easily sold to native stone merchants."

"I would like to have a gamble at that," said Desmond.

"So would I," cried Cicely. "But I wouldn't sell the pearls. I would wear them."

"Humph!" murmured Gordon. "If you are very good—better even than is necessary to earn a bear skin—you may be able to wear some later on. There are plenty of pearls in Ceylon, although there is no fishing this year. Let me see; on what day did you say you would be a woman? It is surely a very long time off yet, isn't it?"

"Oh dear!" sighed Cicely plaintively. "These tests of goodness are becoming too awful. But I must really try hard for this one, Uncle Gerald. It is quite a short time, now. I hope I shall last. I *do* love pearls."

Gordon chuckled.

"It is all very fine to laugh," continued Cicely, "but the test is not without danger. Good people are notoriously liable to early death."

"I'll risk it in your case!" grunted Gordon, smiling.

"Then there is the subsequent reaction to be considered," said Desmond. "I hope the strain will not drive you to awful wickedness afterwards."

Cicely's eyes danced dangerously, but she laughed sweetly. "I won't promise," she said, "as to what may come after. That will depend upon circumstances."

"Well," intervened Margaret, "for the present I advise bed, Cicely."

One by one they followed the girls to the verandah. The bedrooms, infiltrated by the night breeze, opened towards the lake. Within half an hour, the bungalow was absolutely still. Only the croaking of frogs and the snoring of a coolie in the compound competed with the hum of the jungle. The lake was bathed in moonlight, and the shadows of a thousand years outlined its borders.

The road to Trincomalee, after leaving the neighbourhood of Kantalai lake, emerged rapidly from the jungle. The country soon opened out, and signs of cultivation and human influence took up the story.

The distance being only twenty-six miles, Gordon saw no reason for haste. Despite its natural advantages of harbour, Trincomalee had never been able to compete with Colombo as a port. Eastern-bound ships easily slip into Colombo, whereas Trinco' is out of the way. Also, except for fish, there is practically no trade. Even the military garrison has been removed, and the old forts, built by the Dutch, dismantled.

Although they started fairly early, the heat soon began to assert itself. The hot air seemed to rise from the ground like the blast from a bake oven. The sky was almost cloudless.

Amidst open glades and shady roads the car sped smoothly onwards. Presently a glimpse of the harbour appeared through the trees. Native dwellings and fishing boats quickly followed. The vista of island-bedecked water suddenly became superb, and the road ran along by the water's edge. There was still a naval rendezvous at Trincomalee, where at certain times the ships of the East Indies squadron indulged in big gun practice, and spent some six weeks in harbour. There was no railway within sixty-eight miles.

There were no warships in the harbour, so Gordon sped along the shore-road and entered the beautiful grounds of Admiralty House. Facing the back harbour, this residence is beautifully situated.

Passing the house itself, Gordon stopped the car beside an enormous banyan tree which looked like a miniature forest.

"The largest banyan tree in the world outside of Calcutta, I believe," said he. "Look at those big trunks on the outside. They are quite as big as the parent one. I don't know the age of the tree, but it must be many hundreds of years old."

Between the two harbours is a point of land. Gordon turned and, wending his way slowly through the hot streets, entered the Rest House compound.

An aged Tamil man of small stature, with nut-cracker jaws, ran out to meet them. His manner was almost courtly as he bowed and welcomed his guests.

"Permit me to introduce 'Tamby,'" said Gordon.

The old man salaamed profoundly, his eyes twinkling with pleasure.

"Tamby," explained Gordon, "has lived here for more years than any two of us can equal. He is as well known as the Governor, and the fame of his

hostelry is advertised wherever the navy sails the seas. Inside, Tamby will no doubt introduce you to his gallery of portraits. Every admiral, governor and general of Ceylon has for years presented his autographed photo to the collection. Isn't that so, Tamby?"

The old man, whose son in the background must have been somewhere over fifty, became filled with immediate zeal. He led the way into a large room, which, filled with long cane chairs and tables, was practically one with the verandah. The gallery of portraits occupied the walls of the sitting-room. It was certainly an interesting collection; and Tamby's eulogies upon the recipients were decidedly refreshing.

Now that there was no car movement to create a breeze, the heat of the place began to make itself felt most potently. Sitting in peace beneath the great punkahs, all was well, but walking was another matter.

After tiffin, they decided to stop where they were until the sun had dropped somewhat. There were the forts to be visited, and Desmond was already arranging with Tamby for the loan of a boat.

The little compound of the Rest House was never dull. Native peddlers of every variety haunted the place like flies. Their wares ran through a multitude of commodities, from rugs and brass work to live tortoises. The latter, which varied in size from a cheese plate to almost as small as a five shilling piece, filled Margaret and Cicely with the lust of possession. But Gordon warned them that, up-country, the little beasts would almost certainly die.

CHAPTER XIV

THE time passed so rapidly that they were surprised when Peter and the motor arrived from the garage.

"There are two forts, both now absolutely deserted," explained Gordon. "There seems no hope under the present home government of their being reoccupied, but Ceylon still hopes against hope. The Ceylon garrison has been cut down to a mere handful of Artillery and Engineers, and the British regiment replaced by an Indian native one. The alarmists continually preach concerning the madness of leaving Trinco' undefended, and German tourists visit the forts constantly. Still the Admiralty are unconvinced of its strategical importance. There is nothing to be seen at Fort Ostenburg, but from the Saami rock at Fort Frederick there is a view of the Bay of Bengal that I defy you to beat anywhere."

The distance to the fort was very short. The motor ran through the ancient Dutch gates, unchallenged, and pulled up in the open square within. On all sides were large stone buildings with verandahs. There was a silence as of the grave. On the far side, nearest the sea, Gordon pointed out what once was the officers' mess buildings.

"I have spent several festive nights in there, in the old days," said he. "Being far away, as they were, from the military headquarters at Colombo, the little

garrison here was a home of *bon camaraderie* and peace. I am not saying that Colombo is not the same, but this is a different atmosphere, a different world, far from the madding crowd. Civilization has almost lost its trammelled sway in this out-of-the-world spot. Now, as you see, all is dead. Whether the British bugles will ever again sound *reveille* in this fort, or not, is a question. It looks to me as if the *last post* has for the last time echoed amongst the cliffs and bastions. I take an interest in these things because I was originally destined for the army, and am even now an officer in the Volunteer Planters' Corps. I went to South Africa with them."

Walking up an incline, they passed a commodious building which was originally the military hospital. Beyond this, climbing a steep path, half-overgrown with weeds, they reached the top of the ramparts. Below them lay the deserted gun bastions. The path, turning to the right, led onwards past a long building, consisting of a row of small rooms, each with its little door opening on to a verandah.

"The old military cells," explained Gordon. "You can see the orders for the provost guard still standing on the walls."

A native, carrying a slate, ran nimbly up the path and accosted Gordon. Upon the slate was a notice, written in English, warning foreigners against inspecting the fort.

"Go away!" said Gordon irritably, in Tamil. "Imagine," added he to Desmond, "the usefulness of sending an English order by the hands of a native to warn off foreigners! As if there was anything to see, either! I only wish there was."

The coolie, an employee of the Engineers, had

already departed. His official conscience was easily satisfied. Life was short, and sleep very restful.

Suddenly they arrived at the edge of a precipice. Upon the right rose a rock, surmounted by a pillar of stone, that formed the summit of the cliff upon which they stood. Below them, at a distance of some three hundred feet, the ocean beat tumultuously against the impenetrable rock. From the dizzy height one looked straight across the open Bay of Bengal towards India. On the right lay the promontory of land between the two harbours, and, beyond this, the back harbour, with its wooded islands and glistening waters irradiated by the sinking sun.

"This," explained Gordon, "is the celebrated Saami Rock. There was a native temple here once. The Portuguese destroyed it, but now the natives again come here at certain seasons to perform their religious rites. That pillar, according to the guide books, was one of the pillars of the old heathen temple. If we climb up you will be interested to read what is written upon it."

The pinnacle of rock was only a few feet above where they stood. The girls easily reached the summit, and the others followed.

Cicely arrived first, and began to spell out an inscription which was upon the pillar. It was in Dutch, but the lettering was easily decipherable—

"TOT GEDACTENIS
VAN FRANCINA VAN REEDE
Iuf VAN MYDREGT DESEN
A 1687 : 24 APRIL
OPGEREGT."

"What does it mean?" she cried, looking down at her uncle.

Gordon paused to draw breath, and slowly lit a cigarette. The others had already found convenient resting-places, and were feasting their eyes upon the wonderful panorama of ocean and islands.

"Francina Van Reede was a Dutch girl who lived here in 1687. She loved an officer in the Dutch garrison, but one day he deserted her, and sailed away to Europe. She came to this spot to see the last of his ship, and she watched until it had disappeared seawards. Then she threw herself in despair from this rock, down, three hundred feet, into the sea below."

"What a brute!" ejaculated Mallory feelingly.

"Poor girl!" murmured Cicely. "I wonder if her spirit haunts the place still. Do you think it does?"

Standing upright with her arm about the pillar, her eyes focussed upon the distant horizon, Cicely herself might have been sketched as the very maiden in question. Her face was gravely thoughtful and her lissom figure, silhouetted against the skyline, would have served as a model for the most captious artist.

"That is an unanswerable question, I fear," said Margaret, "but if it does, it will at all events find a few sympathetic spirits here at present."

"I wonder what sort of a life a girl led here in those days, and how old she was?" continued Cicely, still looking seawards.

"I give it up," answered Gordon. "The life here then was probably pretty much the same as now, from day to day. Their clothes were different, and there were no telegraphs, but they were no more cut-off from

other big places in Ceylon than we would be now without a motor."

"But don't you think they were?" asked Margaret. "I imagine that in those days the inhabitants of Trincomalee probably only travelled by sea. At all events, we know that it took a ship perhaps three months or more to get here from Europe. News came only at intervals of several months. Imagine waiting in the harbour to board a vessel from home when one had had no news for months and months. Think of the possible news! Marriages, and engagements, and deaths, and goodness knows what else. I should have been afraid to open my letters. There could have been no previous warning of bad news as there were no cables. Think of the excitement amongst the Dutch ladies of the garrison when they opened their boxes of new dresses. Imagine suddenly becoming the possessor of, say, a couple of new frocks, and then, without the previous sight of even a picture in a fashion paper, finding that they were hobble skirts. What a day must have followed the arrival of such a ship in a little place like this."

"It must have been a ripping day," cried Cicely, climbing down from her pedestal. "Think of a big box of new hats."

"An ordinary-sized ship of those days couldn't have carried many of the present-day hats—that is a certainty!" ventured Mallory.

"Who is for a sail?" cried Desmond, jumping to his feet. "Imagine wasting a beautiful evening like this in discussing hats!"

With lingering glances at the entrancing view which spread out upon every side of them, they slowly followed Desmond down the hill. The silence of the

barracks was strangely redolent of days long past. The recent occupation of the place by modern British troops seemed to have left little memory, whilst the shadow of the Dutch seemed to hang about the ancient buildings as if they had left but yesterday.

"There seems to be an atmosphere of old-world romance, a dreamy calling to the senses of spirit voices, and the whisperings of love-tales amidst the rustling of the leaves," said Margaret.

They were one and all loth to leave the spot. Cicely's thoughts could not desert the poor girl of the Saami rock. The presence of the motor car at the gate seemed to her at the moment almost a sacrilege.

"Would you like to come and see what this place looks like from the sea?" asked Desmond insinuatingly, turning to Cicely. "I have arranged for a little boat to be ready, and I will give you a lesson in sailing."

"Rather," she cried. "Do you think that you others can get on without our interesting society for a time, while Mr. Cleeve and I go sailing?"

"We can but try," replied Gordon. "I will drive you down to the Admiralty landing."

"Indeed!" grunted Mallory. "What am *I* to do?"

"You can write that long-deferred letter to your father," replied Cicely. "Or find out from somebody where we can get some good fishing to-morrow."

The journey to the back harbour took but little time. The place seemed so deserted that it might have been a land of the plague. Not a single European was to be seen.

Tamby had proved to be as good as his word, even

if the craft he had provided was more of a canoe than a sailing boat. It was furnished with a lug sail, however, and was clean, so Desmond settled Cicely in the stern, and shoved off.

There was an evening breeze from off the land, and the light boat, catching it immediately, flew seawards with unexpected rapidity.

"Have you ever sailed a boat before?" inquired Desmond, somewhat anxiously.

"Not one like this," she admitted, with a laugh.

"Well then, keep your eye carefully on the sail, and when a squall strikes us, luff her at once."

"H'm. What does that mean, please?"

"It means that you put your tiller down, so that she comes up into the wind," he explained. "There isn't much wind in here, so it is safe enough, if you only pay attention."

"Thank you, teacher!" she laughed. "My eyes shall remain simply glued on that sail. What a lovely place for a moonlight picnic, isn't it?"

"Yes, the whole place is redolent of peace," murmured Desmond. "Back-waters certainly have their charms, but I wonder how long it would take us to tire of them? Work somehow seems to be the medicine of life to an Englishman. We grumble and we groan over it, but we cannot last long in peace without it."

"No, I suppose one cannot always exist on nothing but scenery—not even girls," sighed Cicely. "It is very nice here now, all the same, isn't it?"

"So nice that the idea of my stuffy little office in London gives me the blues. It is very nice to drift in pleasant waters."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Cicely, as the bow of the

boat flew up into the wind, and the sail flapped about Desmond's head.

"Pull the tiller towards you," he instructed, "and please be more careful, or when we get farther out there may be trouble. We don't wish to follow the fortunes of the girl of the Saami rock."

"I was only going to say," remarked Cicely, as the boat again began to rush through the sapphire water, "that I think one would find a planter's life somewhat dull on the whole. It would depend on so many things."

"Yes. Foggy old London has not lost its charm yet. But it may also depend on many other things."

"It must be hard work in London, I should think," she said, catching her breath as a little squall from round a point of land caught the sail and heeled the light boat over almost to her gunwale.

"Very hard, at times," he agreed, looking to windward. "Luff her a bit! There is another squall coming."

"And yet, if I were a man, I would rather have the hard work, the fight for something, than trifle in the sunshine always."

"And so you are ambitious, hey?" he laughed, letting out the sheet an inch.

"If I were a man, I would be," she replied unhesitatingly.

"Ah! And if you were a man's wife, what then?"

"I would be more ambitious still—for him," she answered, nodding her head sagely. "But the man I would marry would require no urging."

The breeze was rapidly strengthening. Having passed a headland, the sweep of the bay was before them. The plaintive cry of seagulls hovering near

the fisherman's huts was the only sound of life. A native boatman, collecting nets on the far side of the bay, was the sole human being to be seen.

"What a very determined young person!" exclaimed Desmond. "You look so deliciously serious over it all, too. I haven't seen you looking serious for many a day. I shouldn't give it up, though, if I were you. If I hadn't forgotten how to flirt, I might say how —well—how—Down with your helm!"

With a suddenness which neither of them had imagined possible, a squall, cutting downwards from the rocks above, struck the light craft and threw her almost on her beam ends. Cicely, unaccustomed to the vagaries of those waters, was too late. She had, in fact, been so interested in the conversation, that she was looking anywhere but at the sail. With a cry of genuine alarm, Desmond sprang to the sheet, which, at the critical moment, as so often happens, jambed in the cleat. In sudden panic, Cicely let go the tiller altogether, but it was already too late to avert the catastrophe. Before they could begin even to think, the boat was filling with water over the leeward gunwale.

The next moment both Desmond and Cicely found themselves in the water, and the boat lying like a derelict toy on its side.

"Are you all right?" gasped Desmond in fear, slipping his hand under Cicely's shoulder as she clung to the boat. "For heaven's sake, don't let go the boat."

"No, I shall hold on all right. Don't be afraid for me," she replied, shaking the salt water out of her hair. "I can swim quite well."

"All right then, I will trust you, but don't attempt

to swim, whatever you do," he urged. "You are sure you can hold on?"

"Quite. It is all my fault that we are here, and I am so sorry."

"It was that confounded sheet that jambed—it wasn't your fault at all," he cried, pulling himself round to the stern of the boat. "Hang on tight until I climb up on the bottom; then I will pull you up after me. There is no danger, and the water is as warm as new milk."

To climb up and straddle the bottom of the boat took very little time, but Desmond seemed to be in a particular hurry all the same.

"Now then, quick!" he shouted, catching Cicely by both wrists. "Up you come!"

"Thank Heaven!" he breathed, as the girl balanced her lissom figure beside him and removed her topee.

"But why so concerned?" she laughed. "A little wetting won't do me any harm!"

"No, but the jaws of a shark might," he answered, pointing to a black fin sailing away to leeward. "This place swarms with sharks."

"Good gracious! How nice of you not to have said a word to frighten me!" she exclaimed, looking up through her wet hair with a grateful smile. Then, ruefully inspecting her sodden frock: "What an awful object I look!"

"A little like a seductive mermaid," answered Desmond, divesting himself of his jacket. "The point at present is, how are we to get back?"

Cicely shaded her eyes with her hand and scanned the shore-line diligently. Beneath the shelter of a bluff, where they had now drifted, the water was as

calm and clear as crystal. There was no necessity for haste, but, unless somebody came to the rescue, it was quite possible for them to sit on where they were until pitchy darkness enveloped the land.

"Well," said Cicely, folding her hands demurely, "we must possess our souls in patience as best we can. By the way, what were you saying when that squall hit us?"

"H'm! Wasn't it something about your unusual attitude of seriousness?" he queried, lugubriously inspecting the sodden cigarettes in his case.

"Or something about flirting?" she ventured, meditatively removing a shoe full of water.

"It may have been that," he answered slowly. "There was a time when I thought you preferred flirting to anything else on earth. I have changed my opinion."

"Oh! You will make me give up that delectable fling in spite of all my inclinations, if you put me on a pedestal," she laughed mischievously. "I assure you I don't feel my wings even beginning to sprout yet."

"Well," he sighed, with an air of relief, "I am ever so thankful that you don't need them yet. That shark frightened me terribly."

The wind had dropped with the sun. There is no twilight in the East, the daylight coming to an end as suddenly as the flicker of a dying lamp. Desmond began to look anxiously towards shore.

"Oh, there they are!" cried Cicely, waving a bedraggled handkerchief. "Just as we were getting on so nicely with our discussion, too!"

"Who—where?" asked Desmond, looking in the wrong direction.

"Why, Uncle Gerald and Mr. Mallory, of course. They are just getting into a boat far up the harbour."

"Thank goodness!" declared Desmond. "All's well that ends well."

With many shouts of encouragement from Mallory—as if the rescued ones were on the point of drowning at that very moment—the boat drew alongside the derelict.

The tale of their adventure was soon told, and, Cicely and Desmond transferring themselves to the boat, the overturned craft was left where she was until her native owner could come out after her.

Before they reached land the gold and crimson sky-line had faded through deepest purple into a star-flecked curtain of darkness.

CHAPTER XV

THE morning was very hot, and the road dusty, but the car, speeding along at a rate of thirty miles an hour, made its own breeze. Gordon knew every inch of the road, and the sixty-nine miles from Trincomalee to Anuradhapura was over dead-level and uninteresting country.

In spite of her boating mishap of the day before, Cicely stated that she never felt better in her life, but seemed to think that an edifying lecture to Mallory would do her good as she sat beside him in the *tonneau*.

Steering close to the great artificial tank which supplies the native modern town of Anuradhapura with its water, Gordon wound through the roads of the dwelling quarter, passed the ruined monastery of the thousand pillars, and, crossing a bund between two tanks, dashed into the drive of a Rest House, which, by comparison with the small ones they had as yet visited, seemed like a large hotel.

It was particularly hot at that time of day, but, beneath punkahs, luncheon was found to be quite an agreeable event, in spite of the heat. The daily supply of ice was, apparently, not due to arrive until the advent of a train an hour later, but, deciding that delay would but enhance the joy of life, they waited patiently in anticipation.

"This place is much too uncomfortably hot to play about in in the middle of the day," said Gordon. "I am going off to hunt up one of the government officials who is a friend of mine. I will be back in plenty of time to play *cicerone.* In the meantime I advise you to study Cave's book on the 'Ruined Cities of Ceylon,' which I have brought with me."

"Oh, but Uncle Gerald, we would so much rather hear you tell us about things," said Cicely. "You do it so nicely, too."

"You are a lazy, wheedling girl," laughed Gordon. "All I know myself of the History of Anuradhapura I have learned from Cave's books."

"How nice!" cried Cicely. "That is better than trusting your memory, isn't it? I am quite sure that I shall listen most attentively. Besides, Mr. Mallory must read the book; and we can't all read at once, can we?"

"Oh, *must* I?" exclaimed Mallory. "I don't feel at all strong to-day."

"Oh, all right, you lazy people," answered Gordon, "I will tell you what I know, but it isn't much. The whole of this sacred city occupies a site which was once the royal gardens of the Cingalese king, Tissa. Somewhere about a hundred years, or less, after the founding of the Buddhist religion by Gautama, that is in the third century B.C., Asoka, who at that time ruled most of India, sent his son, Mahinda, to Ceylon to convert Tissa, who, by the way, was of the same race as himself. History relates that Mahinda met Tissa out hunting at a place about eight miles from here. He converted Tissa, who thereupon gave orders to his wives and followers that they would henceforth consider themselves Buddhists.

This was about the year 307 B.C. Before that time the Cingalese were of the Brahman faith. At the place where Mahinda met Tissa there is a great rock, which rises up for a thousand feet above the plain. Granite steps—over a thousand of them—lead to the top, where there is a dagaba. The place is called Mihintale. If you are not absolutely wearied to death by dagabas before we get through, I'll run you out in the motor, and we can climb the steps."

"Help!" groaned Mallory.

"You will certainly have to go, Mr. Mallory, even if *we* don't," said Cicely. "Your father will expect it of you. It is the stern duty of Uncle Gerald to stand *in loco parentis*."

"I don't know about that," answered Gordon. "I have a rapidly-growing idea that one girl is quite enough for me to manage. In any case, I must be off in a moment, so listen! This King Tissa was apparently a pushing fellow. When he had made up his mind to a thing he got along with it at full speed. When Mahinda had convinced him, he called together all his big men, and, with no end of a gala procession, and much ceremony, he started off to mark the boundaries of the ground which he had decided to dedicate to Buddha. With a golden plough, he furrowed the boundary lines with his own hands, cutting off a space of twenty square miles. In this place he then immediately settled the sites of various temples, monasteries, &c. These are the things we are going to see. Now, I'm off! I'll be back before tea time."

"Thank you so much," cried Cicely. "You really do tell it so nicely. We will be very good until you return."

A couple of hours later, Gordon found the girls

just leaving their bedrooms. Desmond was reading a novel on the verandah, and Mallory was comfortably asleep in a long armchair.

"Look here, you fellows," cried Gordon. "We're in luck. I have been to look up a man who is very keen on shooting. He has located a water hole in the jungle, about ten miles out, where there are recent marks of panther. The whole country is so dried up at present that a good water hole ought to be worth its weight in gold. After a lot of trouble his coolies have found the spot, and now—poor wretch!—he has suddenly been called away on duty and cannot visit the place for a week. He has very kindly offered me his coolies, and given me leave to get what sport I can. I had hoped to get a shot, or two, at something here, but this is a windfall which may give us lots of sport."

"By Jove," cried Mallory excitedly, "that sounds good. I hope I may go too?"

"When will you go?" asked Desmond.

"Oh, to-night. We will arrange to stop out all night. The coolies have built a sitting-out place in a convenient tree. That will do for two of us, and I have already left word for them to make another. We'll get under way about seven o'clock, after what must be a very early dinner. I'll order dinner now."

Suddenly the notes of an American coon dance from a piano broke upon their ears. With one accord they turned and ran down stairs. Cicely, arrayed in white, with a large straw hat trimmed with yellow roses, was gaily hammering upon the piano.

"We are quite ready, Mr. Gordon," said Margaret from the doorway. "Come along, Cicely."

Gordon led the way with Margaret. The road from

the Rest House ran almost directly into the midst of the ruins. Here and there, standing out like white sentinels amidst surrounding trees, they saw various groups of stone pillars.

"Stonehenge!" ejaculated Desmond.

"No," answered Gordon. "But you will see that most of these pillars are beautifully carved, which those at Stonehenge are not. We will cross the road and have a look first of all at the *Thuparama dagaba*. It is the one in best preservation, and was also the first one built by Tissa."

A great, white, bell-shaped structure, standing in an open glade, surrounded by a few palm trees, rose up before them. The principal approach to it was up a flight of broad stone steps flanked by tall carved pillars of stone. In the neighbourhood were many more stone pillars, and the entrance to the stairway was guarded by two stones shaped like tombstones. Upon these latter were carved the figures of what looked like Cingalese dancing women.

"All these dagabas are pretty much alike in their general idea," said Gordon. "If you see one perfect one like this and a couple of ruined ones. you have really seen them all. One of them is as high as St. Paul's, as I told you before, and it has a base circumference of over eleven hundred feet. This one, here, only stands sixty feet in height. Tissa built it to hold a relic of Buddha, the collar bone, which he managed to get Asoka to give him. There are heaps of fairy tales concerning the miracles, &c., which the bone performed on arrival in Ceylon, and there was an enormous procession to convey the thing up from the coast. If you want to learn details I am sure that Mallory will gladly read them for you."

"But how did all these wonderful places get into such a ruined state, if the religion of the Cingalese is still the same?" asked Margaret.

"The Tamils held sway for many years and seized Anuradhapura," explained Gordon. "The place then went to bits, but afterwards a new Cingalese chief rose up and drove forth the usurpers. The Cingalese are still restoring certain dagabas, as you will see when we wander about a bit. Look at those stones at the entrance, called 'guard stones.' Between them you see a half-moon-shaped pavement stone—called a moon stone."

"It is beautifully carved, too," exclaimed Cicely. "Look at the animals—bulls—horses—dogs—tigers. It looks to me quite as good as European carving. I wonder how they learned it, if they were so uneducated. Why, these must be two thousand years old."

"Quite," agreed Gordon. "How they learned the art has always puzzled me also. Of course, the Egyptians were well to the front in those days, but I believe that these dagabas are older than anything they can now show even in India. This country, of course, had nothing to do with Egypt. The work must have been done purely by local labour."

"The carving upon the capitals of those pillars is decidedly remarkable," cried Desmond. "It looks like first-rate modern stone-cutting. What were they for? Do you know?"

"Nobody knows. Probably they were supports for a roof of some kind covering the entrance way. The other pillars round about the place were no doubt portions of priests' buildings and such-like."

Walking up the stairway, they came upon a paved platform, upon which the dagaba was built. This

surrounded the whole structure. There was no entrance to the latter, which appeared to be nothing but a mass of bricks built in the form of a dome, with a short spire on top, covered with cement, and whitened. There was no inside to it, as far as could be seen. It was obviously a monument raised as a tangible act of reverence. The lower foundations of the dome were built in terraces, and upon these, in the larger dagabas, could be found images of Buddha and kings of note.

They walked about the platform, admiring the proportions of the dagaba, and wondering at the life of its builders. Returning to the ground, Gordon pointed out a curious mass of stone about seven feet long, hollowed out into a round basin in the middle.

"That was probably used by the priests as a dyeing vat. You have noticed the peculiar yellow robes they wear. Those were dyed in this vessel, and wrung out to dry upon the end of the stone slab."

A sudden shout arose from Mallory. He had been standing behind them, digging up pebbles with his stick. "Look out!" he cried. "A snake!"

A malicious hissing sound caught their ears, and Gordon turned quickly. Within a few feet of Mallory there arose from the grass the head of a cobra. The beast's hood was expanded, a quarter of his body was erect, and his fangs shot out venomously.

Gordon did not hestitate for an instant. Before the party had time to think of danger, he strode forward, and, seizing Mallory's stick, cut the snake across the neck with all his strength. The impact of the blow threw the beast a dozen feet through the air, and when they reached it it was quite dead.

Mallory stretched it out and measured it carefully.

"Four feet seven," he said. "Is it a dangerous kind?"

"Much more dangerous than a coil of rope at all events," chuckled Desmond.

"H'm!" grunted Mallory, blushing.

"If it had caught you on an exposed part of your body you would have died for a certainty," replied Gordon quietly. "Cobras love stony, warm places like this. I expect he has a mate living somewhere near, for whom, however, we will not bother to wait. We must hurry, anyway. I want to show you another dagaba, which, although ruined, is of a much more pretentious character than this one. I expect by then we shall have done enough for to-day. It is called the *Ruanweli dagaba*. There it is in the distance."

He pointed to what looked like a conical hill covered with scrub jungle. The base of the structure was of uncovered bricks, and the top must have been a couple of hundred feet from the ground. On drawing nearer, it was found that the lower parts were only partially excavated. Enough, however, was shewing to illustrate the generous scale upon which it was built. In the days of its newness it must have been a magnificent sight.

Walking up the steps of approach between the usual rows of stone pillars, Gordon led the way to a stone platform which surrounded the whole dagaba. "This is about a hundred feet wide," he said. "Elephants used to come up by the way we came and march in procession round here."

"I wonder if Barnum, the circus man, was a Buddhist in a former existence?" gurgled Mallory.

The first part of the dagaba, as they examined it

from where they stood, was seen to consist of practically a wall of carved elephants, which were meant to represent a circle of these animals holding up the next platform, or what might aptly be described as the first terrace of the dagaba.

"There are four hundred of these elephants holding up a platform which is five hundred feet in diameter," continued Gordon. "You will notice that their heads are pierced with holes. In their best days it is said that those holes contained real ivory tusks. The elephants are nine feet high, and were covered with white enamel. The height of the shrine itself, which, like all the others, is constructed of solid brick, is two hundred and seventy feet, and the diameter of its base is the same."

"It is a wonderful structure," remarked Desmond. "When it was at its best it must have been very imposing. What are those great figures over there?"

"The statues of a Cingalese king and three *Buddhas*, which I mentioned before. They were dug up near here, and stuck up where you now see them. They are said to have had precious stones for eyes at one time, and are made out of dolomite."

Round about on the great platform lay innumerable remains of carved stonework—elephants' heads—portions of carved pillars—ruined altar stones—and even *Buddhas*, and a miniature dagaba remained intact in the middle of the platform.

"Hundreds of monks were in attendance here at one time, and it is considered that the remains of their buildings must be buried all about here," added Gordon.

"I have seen quite enough to convince me that the ancient Cingalese were not afraid of work," stated Mal-

lory, mopping his perspiring face. "It is a wonderful place, but do you know that it is six o'clock?"

"But there is no hurry, is there?" asked Margaret.

"Rather," cried Mallory. "We are going shooting at seven."

"Shooting in the dark? Where?" exclaimed Cicely in surprise.

"We intend to try for a panther," said Desmond. "It means sitting up in trees perhaps all night, so we must start early. You can get plenty of ruins to-morrow, Meg."

"Oh, how I should like to go," cried Cicely. "Can't you take us too, Uncle Gerald? It would be so nice of you."

Cicely looked up at Gordon with a bewitching appeal that would have melted a stone *Buddha*, but he slowly shook his head.

"Now, there is no use in shaking your head like that. I told you some time ago that it was good for girls to have what they like, and I am sure you have found that to be true. Don't you think you ought to spoil us sometimes?" she asked, naïvely.

"I am afraid this is not a good opportunity for spoiling," laughed Gordon. "In any case, we have only room for four."

"Oh, but I wouldn't care to go," said Margaret. "I would much prefer to go to bed."

The faintest shade of disappointment appeared in Gordon's face. Cicely blindly read it as a change of front. "Come along, uncle," she cried, linking her arm in his, "I will be ready as soon as you are; and I won't be the least little bit of a nuisance"

Desmond laughed indulgently. "You had better give in with a good grace, Gordon," he said.

Cicely threw a grateful glance at Desmond behind her uncle's back.

"Thank you, Mr. Cleeve," she called. "I'll sit on your tree. You, I am sure, will look after me and see that I do nothing wrong."

On the way back Mallory suddenly thrust his arm through Desmond's, and drew him behind the others.

"Look here, Cleeve," he stammered, "you have known Miss Rosmead longer than I. Have you noticed any change in her lately?"

Desmond glanced at Mallory's profile. The latter, with downcast eyes and bent head, was moodily out of step, and appeared to be in fierce throes of melancholy.

"No, I don't think so," he answered slowly. "Why?"

"Oh, only that she snubs me at every turn," grumbled Jack. "She used to be as charming as any girl could be, and now she is never in the same mood for half an hour. Sometimes she seems to forget herself, and is all smiles—then she unexpectedly turns upon me and rends me."

"Oh?"

"You and she seem friendly enough. I thought you might know some reason."

"Humph!" grunted Desmond doubtfully.

"I cannot think what I can have done. I have tried to get some explanation out of her, but she cuts me short," groaned Mallory.

Desmond glanced at the downcast head, and hesitated for a moment before he spoke.

"Perhaps—I only say, *perhaps*—you have tried to flirt too much," he ventured.

"*Flirt*? *I*? Good heavens, man, I have meant

every word I've said to her," ejaculated Mallory.

"Humph!"

"For heaven's sake say something! Can't you help a fellow?" cried Mallory passionately.

"It depends somewhat upon what you want to say, I should think. How can I help you? Am I the custodian of Miss Rosmead's thoughts?"

Mallory slowly lit a cigarette and slung his topee by his chin strap over his arm. For a few moments there was silence. They had reached the entrance to the drive, and crossed the public road.

"What I want to say is simple enough. I—er—want to marry her."

For some inexplicable reason Desmond halted suddenly, stock still, on the footpath. His expression was invisible in the darkness, but for a moment it is certain that he dared not trust his voice to speak. Although he had expected this for some time, there had always been the possibility of a mistake in his beliefs. That an engagement between Cicely and Mallory would be a suitable event he could not deny. If Jack spoke the truth—as there seemed no reason to doubt—his father was in affluent circumstances, and Jack was his only son. What more could the girl's best friends desire for her? Why should his heart have suddenly elected to lose a beat? Why should the earth have for a moment seemed to float nebulously before his eyes? He pressed his teeth together, and, calling himself an ass, turned quietly towards Mallory.

"My dear boy," said he simply, "if it is that way with you, why don't you ask her?"

"I daren't," groaned Mallory.

"Oh! Faint heart never yet won—"

"Oh, yes, I know all that. But she won't give

me a decent chance, and besides—" He threw away his cigarette despondently. "Look here, old fellow, I wish you would help me a bit."

"Help you? How?"

"Well, you can give me a good character, don't you know. You could speak a good word for me. I know she likes you, and values your opinion."

Desmond walked for quite a hundred yards in silence. "I—er—will if I can," he said at last, weighing his words. "But," he added beneath his breath, "the question is, can I?"

They had already reached the Rest House entrance. The ladies had apparently gone to their rooms. Gordon was sitting alone upon the verandah indulging in an ante-prandial gin and bitters.

"Hurry up, you two!" cried the latter. "Have a drink?"

"You'll promise?" whispered Mallory, hurriedly.

Desmond's eyes sought the distant world of stars. A pair of soft, bewitching blue eyes seemed to look back upon him from out of the depths above. A phantom of heaven was drifting from his sight for ever. With a grim smile he brought his senses to earth.

"Yes," he said, "I promise to give you your chance."

CHAPTER XVI

It was quite an hour after dark before they reached the spot where they were to leave the motor car. Gordon had borrowed a third rifle, so that each man might have one. The native *shikari* was anxiously awaiting them. He stated that only that very morning he had seen the marks of both panther and bear at the side of the pool. Like most of his kind, the panthers were (as always), in his opinion, undoubtedly of great size.

They started off without delay in single file. The path struck at once into the very heart of the virgin forest. Within a minute all was darkness;—there was no moon, and beneath the thick foliage the stars were almost invisible. Gordon came last, following Cicely. The latter, clad in blue serge and a cloth hat, professed to be ready for anything.

Gordon had been talking to the *shikari*. Apparently the waterhole was not more than a mile and a half from the rendezvous. The native, at a half run, led the way. The scrub on either side was very dense, with large trees, but now and again a small natural clearing of a few yards in diameter gave them a glimpse of the heavens.

"Panthers are not easily frightened," said Gordon, "but when we once get into our hiding places we should keep as quiet as we reasonably can. You can

sometimes throw sticks at a panther and he won't move, but then, on the other hand, he may slink away at the merest sound."

Cicely's senses were keenly alert to her surroundings. The environment of such an adventure to those unaccustomed to the life of a jungle was in itself sufficient to throw them into a state of suppressed excitement. The very fact that at any moment some wild denizen of the forest might be glaring at them through the bushes was enough to add zest to a walk which in broad daylight might be colourless.

In silence they moved swiftly down a slight incline. Presently the canopy above opened out, and beneath the light of the stars they saw, a few yards ahead, the glassy surface of water. It was quite a small pool, but it was the only water they had seen.

The guide halted, and pointed to a great tree on his left, in the branches of which there appeared to be a sort of leafy bower. Then, speaking a few words in Tamil, he himself swarmed up another tree.

"Here you are, Cleeve," whispered Gordon. "Up you go, and I'll lift Cicely up after you. Keep your eye on her."

The climb to the nearest branch was not difficult. Gordon gave Desmond a "leg-up," and handed him his rifle. The latter, leaning down, could just reach Cicely's hands. A healthy, full-grown English girl is no mean weight, but Desmond was equal to it. In another moment Cicely was sitting beside him.

"Now then," he whispered, "one more climb and we are there."

Behind the shelter of leafy branches the *shikari* had rigged up a regular seat. It was rather a tight fit for two, but, once settled into place, the commanding

view of the open glade and the pool below was perfect.

Desmond immediately loaded his rifle. Then, laying it across his knees, he slipped down by Cicely's side and peered through the leafy entanglement.

Parallel with them, he could see a similar *machan* about ten yards on his left, where Gordon and Mallory had ensconced themselves.

"We are to have the first shot," whispered Desmond. "If a second is needed, it will come from the other *machan*. If a panther does turn up, would you like it?"

"Like what?"

"The first shot. It isn't difficult. There is a piece of white wool tied to the sight, so that you can easily take aim in the dark," explained Desmond.

"Oh, but," replied Cicely, trembling with excitement, "I mustn't. I should miss, and that would spoil your sport. It is awfully good of you, but—"

"Nonsense! I know you would like to. Look, I'll rest the rifle across this branch. When the time comes, all you have to do is to follow what I say. I'll judge the time, and you can shoot."

The minutes dragged very slowly. From where they sat, perched side by side upon a narrow seat made from the cover of a box, they could see the stars reflected in the blackness of the pool, but all else about them was in dense shadow. For the first time in her life Cicely realised what is meant by a "silence that can be felt." Now and again, as a twig cracked overhead, or a sudden rustling of leaves in the night breeze broke the suspense, the girl would give a little quiver of excitement, but she didn't shift her position or speak.

What seemed like half an hour, but what was really not more than half that time, was passed in this eerie silence without a word from either of them. Each minute was more difficult to bear than the last. With eyes and ears and nerves at their acutest tension, the strain momentarily grew more unbearable. At last, when Cicely was thinking that anything—even falling off her perch—would be easier to bear, Desmond's voice broke the spell.

"There is, I believe, no real necessity for keeping so very quiet," he whispered. "Besides, we may have to sit here for hours."

"Oh, I *am* so glad—I mean, that we may speak," sighed Cicely. "I don't believe I could have lasted another minute."

"It is rather trying when one isn't used to it. And, in any case, I have something to say to you."

He shifted his position slightly. Sitting so close to her, as under the circumstances was necessary, he could almost feel each breath she took. The near presence of the girl was telling upon his nerves in a manner that was every moment unfitting him the more for what he had set himself to say.

"Oh, dear," whispered Cicely, noting the tone of his voice, "not another scolding I hope. I have been very good lately—*really*. You know I have."

"Yes, I know," he whispered in a monotone. "In a sense, however, it isn't unlike a scolding. It is on behalf of Jack Mallory."

"But, I haven't—"

"I know. That appears to be the trouble. Mallory complains that you are so unkind to him that he thinks it necessary to solicit my help."

"Oh, does he?" she said, scornfully. "I don't

think much of a man who cannot say things for himself. I really didn't think Mr. Mallory such a coward."

"H'm, I don't think it is that," explained Desmond. "It looks to me rather as if his nervousness was due to sincerity. He is a good fellow. He is—"

Cicely laughed very softly.

"You are very amusing," she whispered. "And so I have been treating poor Mr. Mallory so badly that he has had to cry for help! Am I to flirt with him then—or what do you advise?"

For quite two minutes Desmond didn't move or speak. He could actually feel her breath upon his cheek as she waited for his answer. His pulses were beating in sudden tumult. He had given his promise to Mallory. Honour held him bound to that. With all his strength he strove to utter his words with calm indifference.

"No, not flirt," he murmured. "He asks for more than that."

"Oh! . . . And you are helping him?"

"I said I would help to give him his chance with you—nothing more."

It was too dark for Cicely to read his face, but for all that she glanced searchingly at the dim profile so close to her. He did not return her look, but in the droop of his head she seemed to find an answer to her unasked question. Her eyes, which had a moment before grown very serious, suddenly danced with merry laughter.

"Oh, dear," she murmured, half to herself, "men are curious people. First one must not flirt, and then one must. And—"

"H-u-s-h!" whispered Desmond.

A peculiar grunting noise, followed by the breaking of brushwood and the squelching sound of feet in mud, arose from the left of the pool. Instinctively Cicely raised the rifle and peered through the branches. A moment later, a black ungainly mass appeared at the edge of the water. As to what it was Cicely had no idea, but, pointing the rifle expectantly, she waited.

"Don't shoot!" whispered Desmond suddenly. "It is only a wild pig. Gordon warned me that some might turn up. It is no good to us, and if we fired we might frighten larger game."

The pig, in peace, drank noisily at the muddy edge of the water, rooted about amongst the scrub, and then disappeared as suddenly as he had come. The hoot of an owl was heard in the distance. A wood pigeon, disturbed by some phantom of the night, rustled on a tree top. Desmond was just about to speak when his ears caught the sharp sound of breaking twigs. Automatically he pressed Cicely's hand and waited.

A moment later the dim outline of some animal thrust aside the surrounding brushwood. At first its nature was undiscernible. Then, as it advanced boldly to the water, the first reflection of the rising moon shot from behind a hidden cloud. The beast drank. Then, raising its head, it glanced casually upwards. Cicely could see the yellowish green of its eyes not twenty yards from where she was hidden She had never seen a panther before, but there was no mistaking this cat-like tawny beast, mottled with black spots.

In an instant her muscles were quivering as if with ague. The moment had arrived. Could she perform her part?

"Now then!" whispered Desmond quietly. "Rest the rifle carefully! Don't hurry! Take a long aim at just about his shoulder."

"All right. Only hold me, please, or I'm sure I shall fall," she breathed.

As she spoke she was taking aim, the muzzle of the rifle protruding a foot beyond the leafy cover. The panther was still practically in the same position. He appeared to be in no hurry to finish his drink.

Desmond leaned forward, and, with his left hand, held the barrel of the rifle firmly against the bough. His other arm he slipped about Cicely's waist.

His protecting arm seemed to steady her magnetically. She nerved herself to a special effort. A long aim, assisted by a few whispered encouragements from Desmond, and she was ready. The panther again most opportunely raised his head and glanced at the sky.

"*Now!*" murmured Desmond.

Cicely pulled the trigger! There was a splash of water at the animal's feet. The latter sprang lightly upwards, and then, quivering, stood, with raised head, watching for he knew not what.

"*Missed!*" whispered Desmond.

A second later a flash of fire emanated from the second *machan* on the left, and a rifle shot rang out.

The panther sprang wildly forward and fell into the water. In a moment he was lashing out, and kicking up the mud in a fierce frenzy of pain and fury.

"*The second barrel!*" hissed Desmond. "*Quick!*"

Cicely did not hesitate for one second. Again her rifle rang out!

There was one last convulsive spring from the panther, and then the lithe yellow carcass

lay, half-covered by watery foam and mud, inert, and apparently lifeless, beneath the moonlight.

For a moment neither Desmond nor Cicely moved. Desmond's arm was still about the girl's waist, and he could feel her heart beating madly. Her breath fanned his cheek, and one hand seized his spasmodically.

A shout from Gordon broke the spell. The native *shikari*, who had been well out of danger up a tree, slipped to the ground and ran to the pool.

"Hah!" cried Gordon. "That last shot gave him the *coup de grace*. The honours are yours, Desmond."

"To Miss Rosmead belongs the glory," called Desmond cheerily. "Shall we get down?" he added to Cicely, slowly releasing her and taking the rifle.

"I suppose so," she answered dreamily.

"Come then, I will lower you first," he sighed.

Desmond's nerves, as a rule, were not such as to be unstrung by so mild an adventure as had just taken place, but, explain it as he would, it is certain that he was strangely perturbed. The mere shooting of the beast afforded him little explanation. The seconds, however, during which he had practically held Cicely's yielding figure in his arms, and her eyes had looked to him for help, seemed mapped upon his heart as moments which he could never possibly forget. His thoughts were strangely wandering. Jack Mallory and his affairs were as things of long ago.

Mechanically he dropped to the ground. Cicely had waited for him. The others were already examining the dead panther by the aid of an electric torch.

"By Jupiter," cried Mallory. "My shot must be the one that broke his leg. The second one entered

his chest and killed him. Well done, Miss Rosmead! You're a—ripper!"

"Did you really do it, Cicely?" asked Gordon.

"I pulled the trigger, but Mr. Cleeve helped me," she replied modestly.

"Oh, and so you are a clever girl after all," laughed Gordon. "I thought you were only bragging when you said you could do plenty of clever things besides make your own frocks."

The *shikari* had already begun to drag the animal from the water. They watched him tie the beast's feet together and select a pole to sling the carcass from. Mallory was full of excited comment, and plied Cicely with questions of her feelings at various moments of the adventure. The girl, however, was unusually reticent. She answered in monosyllables and seemed tired. Mallory, much to his disgust, found Desmond not much better.

Under the *shikari's* directions, the men shouldered the pole and prepared to rejoin the motor. As Gordon pointed out, it would be almost daylight by the time they got back to the Rest House, so there was no time to wait for further possibilities of sport.

The progress was slow, but, as the moon had risen, the path was now easier to follow. Peter was found snoring beside the car like a bull-dog. The panther was a splendid specimen, and his body, fastened by the straps, soon hung limply across the luggage rack.

Gordon opened a bottle of soda water, and extracted a whisky flask from the *tonneau*.

"Here you are, Cicely! Just you take a mouthful of this. I expect you need it," he said.

Cicely obediently did as she was bidden, and the others, opening more soda water, followed suit. Then

Gordon took the steering wheel, and Jack Mallory deftly slipped into the *tonneau* beside Cicely, leaving the seat by the driver for Desmond.

It was a perfect night, or rather early morning, and the rush through the air was very refreshing.

Cicely, leaning back in her corner, closed her eyes. She seemed to have several things to think out, but upon no one of them could she concentrate her thoughts. She was not in the least sleepy. Desmond's unexpected championship of Jack Mallory's cause repeatedly claimed her thoughts. Desmond's own attitude towards her was even more difficult of understanding. The methods of men are invariably clumsy, but their objects are not so invariably obvious.

For a time Mallory watched Cicely's apparently sleeping figure in silence. Then, as she opened her eyes and shifted her position, he moved nearer to her.

"Are you very tired?" he asked.

"Yes, rather," she replied, again closing her eyes.

"Too tired to talk a little?" inquired Jack humbly.

"Yes, rather," she repeated.

Mallory's face expressed restless indecision. He shifted uneasily, and made as if to speak; then sighed deeply and retreated again to his corner.

It was not yet break of day when they reached the Rest House. Cicely sprang to the ground and waited for a moment to watch the unloading of the panther. Presently Desmond stood beside her on the verandah. His face was very grave, and he seemed to avoid her eyes instinctively.

"You must be very tired," he said, almost tenderly. "Why don't you go to bed?"

"And so I must be very nice to Mr. Mallory in future—is that it?" she whispered irrelevantly.

He looked distantly to the lightening horizon, and seemed for a moment to forget his surroundings.

"He would like it," he said at last.

"But I am asking you, not him," she persisted. "I value your advice."

"Well, *I* refuse to say another word," he answered, almost fiercely.

A suspicion of mischievous amusement puckered the corners of her mouth, which, had he been looking, might have served to warn him.

"But I thought you had promised him?" she asked, sweetly.

"Yes, fool that I was, I did," he admitted. "But I have said all that I intend to say, and never again will I interfere in other people's affairs."

"Oh?" she laughed. "Then that includes me also—of course. So even if I should be tempted, you wouldn't—"

What subtlety of mischief she was devising for his undoing he was not at that time destined to learn, for an urgent summons from Gordon for help caused him to abruptly join the motor. When next he had time to think, Cicely, her eyes dancing with merriment, was mounting the stairs to her room.

CHAPTER XVII

UNTIL tiffin time, Margaret had the verandah to herself. She did not care to wander alone amongst the ruins, and so snatched the opportunity to write belated letters.

The gong for tiffin brought the others, one by one, into life again. Each detail of the previous night's adventure was repeated for her benefit by the late occupants of both the *machans*, and Cicely again came in for compliments upon the success of her novitiate as a sportswoman.

Upstairs, after luncheon, Gordon was again called upon to disgorge his knowledge of what he intended to show them that afternoon.

"It is all very fine," he argued, "to make me talk like this, but it is dry work, and, besides, it is all in the books."

"Yes, but you can't think how interesting you were yesterday, Uncle Gerald," wheedled Cicely. "You are ever so much better than any book."

"Humph!" grunted Gordon, lighting a cigar, "the indolence of a girls' school must be really terrible."

"You know, uncle, you are wasting an awful lot of energy in argument. You'll be frightfully dry before you even begin."

"Well then, somewhere about the year 164 B.C. —as far as I can remember—the then reigning Cingalese king, Dutthagamini—"

"Help!" interrupted Mallory.

"Made up his mind to recover Anuradhapura from the Tamil marauders who had come from India. Their king, Elara, was challenged by Dutthagamini to single combat. They fought on elephants, and Elara's elephant was overthrown and the king himself killed. His body was cremated upon the spot, and a mound still marks his resting-place there. The Cingalese then re-occupied the city, and began, with wonderful energy, to restore the shrines, &c., and to build various monasteries and palaces. In some cases they laid foundations of stone interleaved with plates of iron and copper. The remains of one of the first of these new structures—'The Brazen Palace'—we will have a look at when it gets a bit cooler."

"Thank you, Uncle Gerald," said Cicely demurely.

"What a lot you will have to write home to your father, Mr. Mallory," remarked Margaret.

"M'yes," murmured Jack. "Isn't it time to start yet, Gordon?"

"All right," answered Gordon, rising. "It is still quite hot, so you girls must wear *topees*."

Turning to the right, Gordon led the way by the road across the *bund* between the two water tanks, and there was no mistaking the mass of masonry which now met their eyes.

Leaving the road, they wandered between the long rows of stone pillars, and Gordon pointed out where the palace portion of the building had been located. "There were," he said, "sixteen hundred of these pillars. I don't know how many remain, but a great many, as you see. The floor is said to have been constructed of marble, and the building was nine storeys high. There were one hundred rooms on each storey.

As years went on, various storeys seem to have been cut off the top, as we know that at one time it was left with only five. The roof was covered with brazen tiles—hence the name. The many rooms were apparently occupied by monks, and in the middle was the gilt hall of the king. The description of this palace is unbelievable. Solomon's temple wouldn't appear to have been in it at all! The pillars in the hall were golden, and festoons of pearls formed the ornaments. In the middle was an ivory throne. On one side of the throne was the moon in silver, on the other the sun in gold, and above it the stars in pearls. The walls were hung with gems representing flowers and fruit, and the place was furnished with valuable couches and chairs. A golden ladle was used at the doorway for the water required for washing the feet and hands of the priests. But there is nothing much left to see now. If one wishes to become impressed, one must let one's imagination soar backwards for a couple of thousand years."

"I should like to have seen those gems, wouldn't you, Meg?" asked Cicely.

"I wonder where they all are now?" said Margaret. "Most of them, I suppose, are still above ground in various corners of the earth. How intensely interesting it would be to be able to follow the peregrinations of even one of those pearls which formed the stars of the ivory throne."

"Speaking of pearls, Miss Rosmead, reminds one of something else, doesn't it?" remarked Mallory. "How are you getting on towards them?"

"That question can have only one answer," replied Cicely. "Can't it, Uncle Gerald?"

"I don't know quite," answered Gordon, laughing.

"You seem to be keeping yourself pretty well in hand, but I have noticed that behind a demurely obedient manner there may lie traps for uncles. Come and inspect the sacred *bo-tree*! You can see its top branches across the road there."

Cicely sauntered slowly ahead of the others with Jack Mallory at her heels. She began to hum an air from Gilbert and Sullivan, then gaily sang the words to Mallory: "Things are not always what they seem; skimmed milk masquerades as cream."

"What do you mean by that?" inquired Jack.

"I wonder," she murmured evasively. "Do you think that the reverse is common? Do you think, for instance, that cream ever tries to look like skimmed milk?"

Mallory glanced at her thoughtful face in perplexity. He wasn't dense as a rule, but for the life of him he couldn't see a loophole of explanation. Cicely appeared to be looking at Desmond, who, smoking his pipe as usual, had passed a few yards on their left.

"Now then, you globe-trotters!" cried Gordon facetiously. "Follow the man from Cook's!"

He stood at the entrance to a walled enclosure, inside of which roamed vendors of flowers, candles, and other tawdry accompaniments of heathen worship. A young priest, garbed in the usual saffron robes, came forward to offer himself as guide. They crossed the courtyard, in which many great fig trees grew, and climbed a stone stairway leading to a small temple. Surrounded by a railing, grew an ordinary-looking ancient specimen of the *Ficus Indicus*. The priest plucked a couple of leaves, and offered them to Margaret.

"This tree," explained Gordon, "is reputed to be well over two thousand years old. History relates that when Mahinda converted Tissa, a great many Cingalese women came forward to offer themselves as priestesses or nuns, but Mahinda said that he himself was unable to instal them as such. It must be done, he said, by a woman. So he sent to India for his sister, Sanghamitta, who was the prioress of a nunnery."

"Please note the necessity for a woman's help," remarked Cicely primly.

"Don't interrupt teacher!" said Desmond, smiling. "It isn't done in the best schools."

"Tissa sent one of his ministers to conduct the lady here," continued Gordon. "At the same time he asked King Asoka, her father, to send with her a cutting of the famous fig tree under which Gautama had been accustomed to meditate. The story of the departure for the Ganges of this cutting, which was enclosed in a golden vase filled with oil, its journey to the sea coast of Ceylon, and its subsequent triumphal progress from the coast to this spot—not to mention the miracles it performed upon the way—is too long and Alladinish for me to remember, or you to believe. This, however, is the result of the imported cutting right enough, I expect."

"I expect those Tamil invaders cut it down for firewood, really, and that the Cingalese, when they returned, planted another fig tree," stated Desmond.

"No, I don't think so," Gordon said. "The Hindoos venerate the same tree, so I expect they looked after this one all right."

"Next story, please!" demanded Mallory, flippantly. "Now that I am worked up to it, I can

stand a lot. Besides, I simply *must* write to my father to-night, and I need copy."

"We will just take a look at the big Buddha down below, and then we shall have to cut across country for half a mile or so. There's another dagaba which my conscience demands that I shall inflict upon you. There are, of course, heaps of little temples all over the place, and probably many more still buried, but we must skip the minor things."

The yellow-robed priest led the way back to the courtyard. Below the elevated shrine which they had just left was found a door leading to a large room, in which the image of an enormous yellow *Buddha*, quite twelve feet high, reached to the ceiling. Round about its base were many burning candles, and offerings of jasmine and oleander flowers. Several women, upon their knees, with clasped hands, were praying silently.

"This is the women's special Buddha," explained Gordon. "Only women pray here."

"Ah, at last," laughed Margaret, "we find our sex's rights. I thought that the poor despised things had none."

"Oh, I think they get on all right even here," answered Gordon. "Cingalese women don't do themselves at all badly."

"Showing that brains will count anywhere," remarked Cicely.

"Or charm," added Desmond.

"Why not both?" cried Cicely merrily.

Gordon led the way across country. Passing the Government Agent's bungalow and the church, they picked up a long road which ran between various small bungalows, and emerged upon waste land

covered with portions of ruined sculpture of all kinds. In parts, the jungle had completely overgrown the granite stairways and pillars, but, rising up above the tree tops, there stood out against the blueness of the heavens what appeared to be a small hill, covered with trees and scrub, and surmounted by a decapitated brick factory chimney.

"That is the *Abhayagiriya dagaba*," said Gordon. "The one which is as high as St. Paul's. In fact, it is fifty feet higher—four hundred and five feet. The diameter of the dome is three hundred and sixty feet."

"Thanks! I apologise," interrupted Mallory, taking out a note-book, "Please wait until I write this down for father. He is a nailer for figures."

"Here is a carving of a seven-headed cobra, which is beautifully done," remarked Desmond, kicking a stone with his foot. "You had better sketch this, Mallory."

"Would you like a gin and bitters?" murmured Mallory. "My brain has collapsed utterly."

"Oh, do look at those sunset tints!" exclaimed Margaret. "That golden-crimsony sort of vapour shading into violet is too wonderful! However imposing these dagabas may have been in King Tissa's time, we are quite sure that sunsets then could have been no better than this one."

"Let us wander back by the big tank, and see what it is like across the water," said Mallory.

"The road past the tank—" Desmond began.

"Leads to the hotel by a short way," finished Mallory.

"And thence to gin and bitters, I suppose you mean?" intervened Cicely, with scorn.

Mallory chuckled brazenly. "*Perhaps*," he

answered. "In any case, the tank at sunset must be perfectly ripping. Come along, Miss Rosmead."

The road ran parallel to the great *bund* of a tank which was several miles in circumference. The walk beneath the trees was delightfully cool and refreshing, and the Rest House was less than a quarter of a mile beyond.

Mallory was obviously not at all interested in sunsets. He strode ahead in silence down the footpath, and, on reaching the Rest House, threw himself into an armchair and called for his favourite evening appetizer.

The air was very still and hot. Margaret watched the darkness creep over the heavens, and sighed happily. All the earth seemed at peace, and even those that lived therein.

CHAPTER XVIII

Jack Mallory sat at a small writing-table on the upper verandah in the throes of letter writing. Cicely, dressed in an evening frock of pale blue *crêpe de chine*, slowly sauntered across from the piano. It was half an hour after dinner. She had been fitfully playing the "Merry Widow" waltz, but, with the excuse that it was too hot for even the exertion of that, she had shut the piano.

Desmond was smoking at the far end of the balcony. Gordon and Margaret were immersed in a game of picquet. The punkahs swished sleepily overhead.

Cicely glanced with apparent casualness at Desmond's immovable figure. As if by the influence of telepathy, the latter turned and smiled as he met the girl's look. She shook her head with an air of petulance. Her flushed cheeks, her half-parted lips, and the sweet seriousness within her eyes as she drew nearer to Mallory did not fail to attract Desmond's attention. With half a glance, he could see that something unusual was troubling her, and that it concerned Mallory. A sense of delicacy drove him still further away towards the seclusion of the far verandah.

Without ceremony, Cicely seated herself at the side of Mallory's table.

In surprise, Mallory threw down his pen. The unexpectedness of her gracious attitude found him

for the moment speechless. But his eyes instantly glowed with delight as he turned to welcome her.

"What is it?" he asked at random.

"Do go on with your writing. I am sure you must have heaps and heaps to write about. If you haven't, I will help you," she said.

"Oh, bother writing!" cried he. "It's too hot to write."

Leaning his elbows on the table, he gave himself up to unconcealed admiration of the dainty figure beside him.

Cicely was looking deliciously pretty.

"What a ripping dress!" he said.

"Oh, do you like it?" she enquired indifferently.

"Rather. It suits you so well, and—"

"I am so glad you think so, because I want you to like me to-night," she said.

Mallory's eyes flashed wonder. This new mood of demure graciousness was beyond his comprehension.

"You see," she continued, "I am afraid I have been—well—not too pleasant to you lately. At all events, that is what Mr. Cleeve says." A mischievous twinkle began to dance within her eyes. "You were so badly used by me, I hear, that you thought it best to ask Mr. Cleeve to intercede for you. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, I did," he replied. "You have been snubbing me so much, that I asked Cleeve to speak a word as to my character, etc. Men know men so much better than women do, that I thought you would possibly value Cleeve's opinion."

"Oh! And so you think a girl is not capable of forming a fair estimate for herself of a man's character," inquired Cicely. "In my case you are

quite wrong. I always know when I like a man."

Mallory leaned a shade nearer to her. The expression of his face was not difficult to read. The devouring gaze that he lavished upon the girl at his side was only too plainly translatable. Cicely instinctively moved her chair a little farther off.

"And I have always been able to understand you *quite* easily," she added.

"Do you mean that, in spite of all your snubbing, you really do like me" stammered Jack.

Cicely turned a pair of astonished eyes upon his flushed face, and laughed gently.

"Why, of course, you foolish boy," she answered. "Surely you know that."

For an instant Mallory's face fell. Then, glancing quickly at the picquet players, he reached across and seized Cicely's hand.

"But, Cicely, listen!" he whispered hoarsely.

"Oh, it is nothing to be so serious about, is it?" she interrupted hastily. "We are friends again, *n'est ce pas?*"

Slipping her hand from beneath his, she slowly rose to her feet.

Mallory impulsively rose also.

"But I am afraid that it has long ago got beyond the stage of friendship with me," he began.

"Oh, well, Mr. Mallory," she answered, stifling a well-feigned yawn, "I am sorry that you do not wish to be friends. I thought you would like it."

"Oh, but I do," he whispered agonizingly. "You understand what I mean quite well. *Do* listen for one moment. What I want to say is serious. I *must* speak to you."

"Oh, please don't be serious to-night," she pleaded. "You don't know how tired I am. I really must go to bed." She turned and held out her hand, smiling sweetly. "We *are* friends, aren't we?"

Mallory groaned with impotence, and, dropping her hand, sank back into his chair.

"Yes, I suppose so," he said lugubriously. "Good night."

Cicely's departure reminded the others of the lateness of the hour, and that morning must see them early astir, so they were not long in following her example.

The car was at the door next morning, snorting impatiently, long before anybody but Gordon and Desmond was ready. As the girls appeared upon the scene Desmond arrived from the direction of the kitchens, chuckling with amusement.

"I went for a short walk towards the town," he said. "There is no end of a noise of drums going on down there, and the place is decorated with little flags on long poles."

"Oh, beating *tom-toms*," explained Gordon. "They always make that poisonous noise whenever there is a festival of any kind. They are kettle drums. The natives will pound upon them all night and all day with hardly any cessation, and I won't allow them on my estate unless they ask permission. When any big event is on the *tapis* I grant the permission, and then clear out myself for a day at the Hill Club at Nuwara Eliya."

"Yes, I saw some of the drums," said Desmond, "and gathered that something special was going on. I have just been to interview one of the waiters here about it. He says it is a big religious festival which will go on for several days. He explained that it

would be a bad time, as many men would get drunk and dissipate for days in consequence—'Same like Master's Good Friday,' he added."

"What a day to chose as a simile!" cried Margaret.

"That is why I am amused," answered Desmond.

"Do you lazy people know," asked Gordon, "that we have to get to Jaffna to-day? I may mention that Jaffna is at the extreme north of the island, and, although the island is small, still, we've got to go about a hundred and twenty miles before dark. If we get off at once, we can run in and inspect a little rock temple that I wish to show you, and also get a glance at Mihintale as we pass."

"*What!* That place with the beastly flight of a thousand steps?" gasped Mallory.

"Yes. But we shan't have time to climb up. I have just got a wire from a friend of mine who lives in the fort at Jaffna. He is a bachelor government official, and has a nice large house to which he has invited the lot of us. He says he is meeting us at a little Rest House about fifty miles from here, and expects us to tiffin."

It was still early morning, and the air was comparatively cool. The car slipped rapidly past the remains of The Brazen Palace, through the native town, and within a few minutes was in the open country. Presently Gordon pulled up in a roadway. On their right was a footpath, a few yards long, leading between two small tanks towards a rock, upon the side of which was a temple approached by a short flight of steps.

An old priest and a young one came briskly forward,—the former carried an enormous key of

nearly a foot in length. The ground about the rock was sandy, and in it had been freshly traced, with a stick, a criss-cross pattern such as might delight a child.

Gordon spoke a few words in Cingalese. The old priest smiled and pointed to the sand.

"That is drawn," he said in his own language, "as an adornment to the surroundings of the temple. We honour Buddha by making the place beautiful. Come and see my temple!"

The old man climbed the stairs, and with his great key unlocked a door. Inside was a tiny room. Opposite the door stood a large Buddha, gorgeous in fresh paint and decorations. About its base was a collection of little buddhas of every conceivable size and variety, amongst which reposed a tray heaped high with silver rupees, bracelets, rings, earrings, and other articles of value.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Cicely. "What on earth will he do with them all?"

The old priest smiled urbanely, his clean-shaven bronze face puckering into a hundred creases. At Gordon's question, he pointed to the rows of small *buddhas*, and smiled.

"The silver offerings are melted down into those," he said. "When the tray is full enough, we shall make another."

Mallory was examining a visitors' book which lay upon a little table behind them. The priest turned and pointed to the names in the book. Amongst them was that of the Crown Princess of Germany. With much pride, he then brought forth some photographs which he had collected. There were various priests amongst them, including himself, but the *pièce de*

résistance was a large photo of the young princess, to which she had affixed her autograph.

The old man bade them 'good-bye' with reluctance. He liked talking and shewing his treasures, but accepted, with thankfulness, a donation of a few rupees for his temple.

Cicely, for reasons of her own, now elected to occupy the front seat. Mallory, in consequence, thought it was high time that he was allowed to drive the car again. His request, however, being met with unanimous refusal, he was forced to retire in gloom to the *tonneau*.

A few miles farther on, Gordon turned off the main road. Straight ahead appeared the hill of Mihintale, around which, stretching as far as the eye could reach, were level rice fields and jungle.

"This is the place I told you about," said Gordon; "where Mahinda first met King Tissa. Mahinda died here eventually, and is buried, not far off, in a small dagaba, made of masonry instead of the usual bricks."

"Another injustice to women!" guffawed Mallory. "What's on top of the hill?"

"A tank, cut out of the solid rock, which is called the Snake Bathing Pool. There is a large five-headed cobra cut out of an overhanging rock which is on one side of the pool. This cobra was supposed to have curative powers over those who bathed, and nobody who killed anything was allowed near the place."

"I can quite understand now why Buddhists object to killing animals," said Margaret. "One might, according to their belief, be killing one's own relations."

"I think I should like to be a woman in the future existence," remarked Mallory. "I would have great fun out of the men. With my previous knowledge of the ways of men, I would lead them the deuce of a life—provided, that is, that I was a pretty woman."

"Oh," said Cicely, catching his eyes with meaning, "then you consider that it is a fair and proper thing for a woman to play the deuce, as you call it, with men, do you?"

Mallory's face fell. Cicely laughed lightly.

"Of course, it depends on the circumstances," he stammered.

Gordon and Margaret were already waiting at the car, so Desmond joined the other two. The sun was shining out of a perfectly cloudless sky, and apparently there had been no rain for months. The jungle fairly crackled with dryness, and the ground was as hard as a brick.

Cicely glanced across at Desmond. Within her eyes was a look of challenge which to Mallory was beyond understanding.

"And do you also think, Mr. Cleeve," she asked, "that a woman should play with a man under certain circumstances?"

"I am afraid that, rightly or wrongly, a pretty woman invariably does play the deuce, as Mallory so elegantly puts it, with a man under any circumstances," he replied slowly.

"Oh," laughed Cicely, "but I am sure there are heaps of men whom no woman could influence."

"I myself haven't come across them yet," replied he simply.

"You'll get no tiffin if you don't hurry. We have

over forty miles to do yet before we reach our halting place," called Gordon.

"*I'm* not one of them," murmured Mallory.

"Pouf! *You*! Who ever thought you were?" cried Cicely. "But even if you are easily overcome by women's wiles, I think you are beautifully resilient," she added sweetly.

CHAPTER XIX

The road to the north ran almost level. An occasional small village was passed, but after the first twenty miles or so, hardly a sign of habitation met the eye. Now and again a bird would fly across the road, or a few chattering monkeys would grimace amongst the overhead branches, but no other signs of life were visible. The region of dagabas and ruined palaces was a thing of the past. The land that they were rapidly approaching was, with each mile, approximating to that of India.

Gordon let out the brakes and reserved his attention for the accelerator. The syren screeched through the jungle in long blasts of agony. Presently the railway line appeared on the left, and a mile-post marked the seventieth mile from Jaffna.

"We ought to get lunch in about twenty minutes at this rate," said Desmond. "We are doing forty easily."

"Good!" ejaculated Gordon. "I hope young Martin has turned up all right. He is an ingenuous young man who ought to fall in with your ideas of life, Mallory. You will find him an excellent fellow, who drifts with delightful casualness through the troubles of this wicked world. It was extremely sporting of him to offer to put up such a formidable party." He laughed softly. "He isn't averse to ladies' society,

however, and as Jaffna, I believe, possesses practically no feminine charms whatever, I think that he is probably looking forward to seeing us. He little knows what sort of a young woman Heaven has given me for a niece."

"I think Heaven has been remarkably considerate—has, in fact, pampered you," asserted Cicely blithely. "Is he nice looking?"

"Who?" asked Gordon, peering steadily down the road.

"Mr. Martin, of course."

"Not bad. Tall and well-built, and delightfully cheery," answered Gordon absent-mindedly

"Humph!" grunted Mallory.

The figure of a man suddenly appeared stalking down the road ahead, and a moment later the low Rest House building shot into sight.

"There he is now," cried Gordon. "Hooray!"

The pace gradually slowed down, and in another minute Gordon pulled the car to a standstill. A tall, fair, young man of about twenty-three years of age, with a round, clean-shaven face, waved his hand joyously.

"Good fellow!" cried Gordon. "I'm jolly glad to see you. I hope you will be able to come along with us after tiffin. It will be a squash in the *tonneau*, but you won't mind that, I'm sure. This is my niece, Miss Rosmead; Miss Cleeve, Mr. Cleeve, and Mr. Mallory are behind."

Martin glanced shyly at Cicely, who smiled encouragement. A suspicion of a blush rose to his cheeks as he bowed politely, and turned to open the door.

"I hope you are all hungry," he said, "because I

have worried the Rest House keeper grey ever since I turned up this morning. I think you'll like Jaffna. We can play tennis, and there is plenty of sailing and fishing."

"It is very kind of you indeed to have us, Mr. Martin," said Margaret. "We are certain to like it."

Martin's comprehensive smile seemed infectious. Margaret found herself laughing at nothing, and the others followed suit. The Rest House cook was already on the run from the back premises. The spontaneous gaiety and humour of their new acquaintance was decidedly exhilarating. Corks soon began to pop, and despite the heat and flies, everybody was in the highest spirits. Even Jack Mallory, who had been very quiet all the morning, let himself go once more, and regaled them with stories of an Irish Militia camp which threw them into roars of laughter.

"A funny incident came up before me a few days ago at Jaffna," said Martin. "In my official capacity, I was called upon to listen to the story of a Burgher girl who wished to complain of the unwelcome attentions of a man of her own class. Why she came to me I cannot say, as the whole thing was a storm about nothing. The lower classes of Burghers, as you have probably heard, are only half educated in English. The consequence is that they are notorious for the amusing way in which they express themselves. This girl blushed (as best she could with a walnut-juice skin) as she stood before me, and I had to try and put her at her ease. 'You must regard me,' I said, as an official, and not as a man."

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Gordon. "And may I ask what you did with your face during your examination? As the confidant of a young woman in the troubles

of love, you must have afforded a delightful spectacle."

"I controlled my face with remarkable severity," replied Martin, grinning. "I made her repeat in detail what had happened. 'He put his arm about my waist,' she said, 'and whispered.' 'What did he whisper?' I demanded. She giggled. 'He said—Almira, I have a feeling for you; you must give place for that.' 'Well, and what did you say?' I asked. "I said—Joseph, I am a poor girl, but I can still earn enough rupees at the mission to keep the dog from the manger.'"

"What on earth did she mean?" cried Mallory.

"She meant, of course, 'the wolf from the door,' which was near enough for a Burgher."

"Reminds me," said Gordon, "of a Burgher at a Colombo hotel. He wished to impress the dining-room with his European tastes. In a loud voice he summoned the waiter. 'Heigh, man,' he cried, 'roast beef and no mint sauce! How dare you?'"

Desmond chuckled. "One's sense of humour out here need not die for want of nourishment."

"Not a bit of it," laughed Martin. "Even the stolid Tamil can produce episodes of his own idea of humour. He wouldn't call it humour, but that is the way it appeals to me. I came across a case lately of a coolie on a tea estate, who was regularly had by a confidence trick man of his own caste. The manager of the estate encourages his women pluckers to save their money by putting it into jewellery. That is a well-known way, of course, for Tamil women to bank their savings. Instead of their rupees lying in the bank, they carry them in the form of earrings and

bracelets. The women on this estate were full of jewellery, which the estate paid for and charged to them. One day an innocent stranger came along, and, meeting a coolie of the estate on the public road, entered into conversation with him. The stranger related that he had dreamt a dream which he felt convinced was true. Although he had never heard of this estate before, he had been told in this dream that under a certain tea bush was buried a case of gold. After some preliminary *palaver* he agreed to enter into a partnership with the coolie, in return for which the latter would conduct him as a guest to his hut, and, being conversant with the geography of the estate, would assist in unearthing the treasure. Later on, apparently, it was revealed to the dreamer that a charm of gold and silver must be produced before certain incantations relative to the position of the tea bush could become effective. The coolie produced his wife's jewellery. The stranger, holding the jewellery, led him at night to the highest point of the estate. There, under a certain bush, they dug with their hands until they realised that they ought to have brought a hoe. 'I will return for a hoe,' said the confidence man, 'whilst you stop here and watch the tea bush—otherwise, amidst all these bushes, we may not again find the bush!' The innocent coolie did as directed. At daylight he was found still guarding the bush. Where his partner was by that time nobody yet knows."

"Ripping!" exclaimed Mallory. "It was a more elaborate scheme than the three-card trick, but the results were as good."

"Time to go," said Gordon. "If you will honour me, Miss Cleeve, by sitting in front, we will pack the

youth—*and beauty*—higgledy-piggledy into the *tonneau*. We still have sixty miles before us, and I want to cross Elephant Pass by daylight."

It was a tight squeeze in the *tonneau*, but they managed it somehow. Cicely, sitting between Mallory and Martin, was sublimely oblivious of her surroundings. She talked to Desmond, who was on Mallory's left, as if the latter was a member of the spirit world. Mallory, who had seized the seat nearest Cicely with marked avidity, became momentarily more and more subdued.

Desmond could see but occasional glimpses of Cicely's face, but in her voice there was a note of wickedness which he did not fail to catch. Martin's shy attitude would have amused Gordon not a little, could he have seen it. The comprehensiveness of the latter's susceptible heart was only equalled by that of his habitual smile. Gordon, however, kept his thoughts to himself. Nevertheless, during the last few days, not having been blind to Jack Mallory's attentions, he chuckled inwardly as he wondered what would happen when two hearts that might soon beat as one should realize each other's rivalry.

But Gordon's mirth seemed premature—certainly as regards any advance made by Martin. Cicely, from the start, had diagnosed her prospective host. She liked him at the first glance, but her experience of the world, as deducted from association with Mallory, had armed her as with a coat of steel. She had no intention of flirting with Martin.

"I say, Miss Rosmead," grumbled Mallory, presently. "I am not an illusion, you know. You might speak to me sometimes. Hang it all, you can't help seeing me. I'm big enough."

"Oh, I see you all right; why shouldn't I? I suppose you meant an hallucination," replied Cicely haughtily. "An illusion is something that one knows one sees."

"Oh, it is all the same. You can call me a delusion if you like, only, for goodness sake, say something."

"I'll wager that not one of you can correctly define the difference between delusion, hallucination, and illusion," said Desmond.

"Go on, Mr. Mallory," said Cicely, severely.

"I give it up, straight off," groaned Mallory. "All I know is that I myself am a stern reality, and spend my time in being snubbed."

"I know," declared Martin. "If you look at me, and mistake me for the devil with horns and a tail and all the etceteras, that would be an illusion. If you saw the devil sitting beside you here, when nobody was here at all, that would be an hallucination. If you, Miss Rosmead, thought that you yourself were a devil, that would be a most obvious delusion. That's what the dictionary says, anyway."

"Then Mallory's cobra at Dambulla was an illusion," said Cicely innocently.

"That's it—rub it in!" grunted Mallory.

"On general lines the dictionary may be quite right," remarked Gordon over his shoulder, "but, concerning delusions, your applications, Martin, appear to me to be doubtfully correct."

"Oh, and I am a devil then, am I? What next must a dutiful niece put up with, I wonder?" cried Cicely. "I'll pay you out for that, Uncle Gerald."

"We know," said Desmond, "that devils are constantly concealed by the most charming exteriors, but

I believe that it is customary for angels to often hide themselves as well."

Cicely's eyes gleamed wickedly as she shot a glance at Desmond; they challenged him to battle.

"Does that mean that I must either be a devil, or look like one?" she inquired, severely.

For a moment Desmond did not answer, but Mallory laughed boisterously. Gordon and Margaret were intent upon their own conversation.

"Well?" demanded Cicely.

"You look what you are," he whispered. "What that may be I leave to your woman's intuition to discover."

"Oh," she murmured, "that sounds as if you meant to be nice."

"What are you two wrangling about now?" cried Mallory.

"Only concerning what constitutes a charming girl," answered Desmond quietly. "And for once Miss Rosmead and I quite agree."

CHAPTER XX

The great red orb of the sun was very near the watery edge of the world as they passed over the isthmus of Elephant's Pass. The waters of the lagoon on either side spread out in glassy calmness to the horizon, and islands of cocoanut palms and palmyras appeared in the evening light like mirages in the desert. A few fishermen, wading waist-high, were casting their nets with dexterous sweeps of their arms, and drawing in multitudes of glistening little fish resembling white-bait. The smell of the air, wafted across some miles of lagoon, seemed, after the heat of the jungle, to breathe purity and elation.

"Jaffna seems rather a biggish place," remarked Desmond.

"Oh, yes," said Martin. "There are about forty-five thousand natives, a police barracks, and a jail inside the fort. It is a great district for tobacco growing. There are large fields of tobacco beyond the town, and the famous Jaffna cheroots are made here." He smiled humorously. "You had better try them, Mallory. I personally am not strong enough."

Presently the low-lying native houses of the town, half concealed by tall palms, slipped into view. The car ran noiselessly between fences, above which only the roofs of the bungalows were visible. No children or wandering animals competed for place on the road-

way, which was almost deserted. On either side it was seen that the compounds were cut off from public gaze by neatly matted fences of palmyra leaves. Here and there a small door was cut in the fence, through which the owner of the hut and his entourage could find an entrance.

The view across the lagoon in the evening stillness was strangely peaceful; fishing boats lay idly at anchor after the day's work, a few sea-gulls flitted across the sands. Facing this sea road were some scattered European bungalows, occupied by certain officials.

Martin wished to visit a shop; so again the car turned inland. A street of white-faced cement buildings represented the business quarter of the town. Upon the fronts of several of these were displayed the work of native artists in bold colouring and originality of outline—princes and fierce warriors, riding on gaily-caparisoned horses, affording most interesting studies of native art.

Martin pointed out a large emporium where European goods of many varieties could be sampled. There the car pulled up, until a few luxuries of the menu, consequent upon the influx of unaccustomed feminine visitors, could be ordered by their host. The European advertisements upon the front walls of the shop kept their attention fully occupied during his absence. The previous year's Christmas posters held the most prominent place. Santa Claus, eight feet high, arrayed in fur coat and snow boots, looked benignly across a hot street of staring, half-naked natives.

"How very weird that seems, doesn't it?" said Margaret. "I wonder what strange dreams floated

through the sleep of the little native children here when they first gazed upon those wonderful posters? Does Santa Claus find any counterpart, I wonder, in either Mahommedan, Buddhist, or Hindu lore?"

Martin, followed by an obsequious Mahommedan shopman, re-appeared, armed with a large tin of chocolates.

"Now then," he cried, cheerily, "if you will kindly overlook the many deficiencies of a wretched bachelor's menage, I think I may say that I am ready to face my responsibilities."

Straight ahead, upon their left, was the police barracks, and beyond that was the entrance to the fort.

Gordon slowed the car. A broad expanse of grass-grown plain and a moat surrounded the grey walls of the fortress.

"The moonlight upon the moat is very beautiful from the ramparts," said Martin.

"Can we go up there after dinner to-night?" Mallory asked.

"Certainly. It ought to be delightful about nine o'clock," replied their host, with enthusiasm. "It is a most romantic spot."

"Are you very romantic, then, Mr. Martin?" asked Cicely demurely.

"Humph! Gordon always says so. There isn't much chance up here, even if one wanted it. It is the dullest hole in Ceylon. You mustn't listen to a word your uncle says, Miss Rosmead."

A drawbridge crossing the moat led to enormous wooden gates studded with iron spikes, and the car slipped across beneath a stone portico, upon the left of which was a guard-room. A native policeman

saluted respectfully, but no sign of military occupation caught the eye. Pyramidal heaps of ancient cannon-balls of all sizes, and a small cannon or two, faced the entrance.

"Those spikes in the gates," said Martin, "were for the purpose of defence against elephants. In times of siege they prevented the elephants from battering in the door with their heads. You will see '1680' cut in the stone over the gate."

"Charles the Second's reign," remarked Mallory promptly.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Cicely. "Really, Mr. Mallory, your superior knowledge is quite embarrassing."

"The fort was originally built by the Portuguese about that year," laughed Martin. "Early in the next century the Dutch besieged the place by land, and cut off all chance of reinforcements coming by sea from Goa. It took them a year to starve out the Portuguese, but they got this place in the end. They then pulled down the fort, and built another after the fashion of Prince Maurice of Nassau—whoever he was. We took it from the Dutch, and now it is deserted even by our troops."

"Well done!" exclaimed Gordon. "I find myself confronted by a rival—another man from Cook's!"

Martin laughed. "I have only just learnt it all myself. The Dutch church inside is the best thing to see."

"I think this an intensely romantic spot, Mr. Martin, and it is very nice of you to take so much trouble for us," said Margaret. "Mr. Gordon is jealous of your descriptive powers."

Meanwhile, the car had entered the fort. A large

open square, covered with green turf, fronted them. Houses of minor officials occupied two sides of the square, whilst upon the side facing the entrance gate were to be seen the large stone houses at one time occupied by officers of the Dutch and English garrisons. On the right of the line, a long low stone building, with an extraordinarily spacious verandah, at once caught their attention.

"I hope that palace belongs to you, Martin," called Gordon.

"I'm afraid not," replied their host. "That is called the King's house. It is only used by bigwigs when they come interfering with our comfort and peace of mind on inspection duty. The Governor and Chief Justice live there for a few days once in a blue moon."

The road on the right passed a couple of tennis courts, next to which a square church rose high above the ramparts. Turning sharply to the left, past the King's house, Gordon pulled up the car before the entrance to a house separated from the road by an attempt at a garden.

"By Jove, Martin, this *is* a palace!" cried Gordon.

"It looks very nice and cool, and I am very hungry," added Cicely.

"There are beautiful great stone baths that you can actually swim in," said Martin, jumping to the ground. "I have heaps of rooms, too. These Dutchmen evidently liked doing themselves well."

A couple of Tamil boys hurried from the bungalow and began to help Peter unload the car.

"Dinner ready, boy?" asked Martin anxiously.

"Yes, master."

"Plenty of turtle soup?"

"Yes, master, two turtles have got."

"Ye gods!" exclaimed Mallory. "We are not expected to have our baths in turtle soup, are we?"

"You can if you like," answered Martin, grinning. "They catch heaps of them here. They are collected by the fishermen during the week, and kept on their backs in a hut on the beach. On Sundays they kill them."

"Do the poor things have to lie there on their backs for, perhaps, a whole week? Isn't that very cruel?" asked Margaret, sauntering up the path.

"The police once came to the conclusion that it was; but the Colombo authority on natural history apparently did not agree, so the same rule continues," explained Martin, leading the way into the bungalow.

It was already dark within. The door opened direct into a drawing-room, furnished with several long cane chairs and plenty of comfortable arm chairs. The stone-paved floor was covered with a thick rug. There was a commodious writing-desk, and many small tables, laden with books, filled odd corners. A crimson-shaded standard lamp glowed welcomingly. The room was large and of unusual height.

"What a splendid room!" exclaimed Margaret. "The Dutch certainly seemed to have liked plenty of space."

"Yes, all the older bungalows of that time, built in the hot parts of the island, were very lofty and airy. Modern buildings are, by comparison, poor affairs," said Gordon. "I fancy that government in those days was more easily worked—or, what was more likely, the natives more easily robbed. I don't think that either the Portuguese or Dutch were liable to overdue consideration of the likes and dislikes of the

natives. In any case, it would seem that money was plentiful and labour probably cheap."

The dining-room, opening out of the other room, was equally large and lofty. The bedrooms, approached from the verandah, had been built on the same generous scale. Margaret and Cicely were given the largest apartment to themselves, and the men found beds in the smaller rooms. Off the large room was a stone-paved bathroom which contained, as Martin had said, an enormous stone bath. Steps led to the bottom of the bath, which was fed with water by a trough running from a pump outside, and in a small courtyard, abutting upon the wall of the fort, an ancient well supplied unlimited water. The soft evening breeze from the lagoon blew refreshingly through the house.

Martin's guests were delighted with the novelty of their new quarters. They had been on the move so long that the prospect of a week's peace in this secluded corner of the world appealed to them most alluringly. It is possible to comparatively hide one's self in an English village, but the nearness of trammelled civilization must be there an ever-present thought. Here, there was no city for hundreds of miles. The history of this place, also, in which they suddenly found themselves, had laid hold upon Cicely and Margaret with an urgent appeal to their sense of sympathy. An old-world atmosphere permeated every nook and cranny. What histories might these walls reveal, could they but speak! What throbbing hearts may have struggled in vain to sleep within these rooms! What tales of love, of tragedy, perhaps, and even of death, may have been enacted on the spot where they now stood!

"I think, Meg.," said Cicely, with excitement beaming from her eyes, "that this old house is perfectly fascinating. I intend to explore every corner of it. I hope it isn't full of ghosts, but I fear the worst. Is your bed big enough for two, dear?"

"It is too hot for two, anyway," answered Margaret, laughing. "Oh, dear, I do hope that no ghost will want to share my bed with me."

The sound of a gong reverberating through the building caused Cicely to suddenly spring to her feet.

"Oh, how that frightened me!" she gasped. "I suppose it only means dinner after all."

CHAPTER XXI

Dinner proved to be all that had been expected of it. In such an out-of-the-world place the delicacies of a modern hotel could hardly be expected, but if well made turtle soup, and fish whose freshness was certified for by the fact that it had only that morning been gaily swimming in the lagoon, is of any special value, then their young host had no cause for shame.

"It there any ghost story connected with this house, Mr. Martin?" asked Cicely during dessert.

"I haven't heard of any, and I can truthfully state that *my* sleep, so far, has never been disturbed by spirits from another world."

"Or this world either, I hope," cried Gordon, facetiously. "In my young days we drank water!"

"I am quite sure that the spirit of some Portuguese or Dutch maiden haunts the place," said Desmond. "With a history such as this fort has, it would be insulting to the place to believe otherwise. For instance, I am quite prepared to-night to find that the spirit of a Dutch officer with a bright red dagger wound in his heart will rise from the well, and, stalking across my room, stand in melancholic grief over my sleeping figure, in the belief that I am the body of his long-lost sweetheart. It stands to reason that it should be so."

"Oh," whispered Cicely, "I do hope he doesn't come and stand over me!"

"I assure you, Miss Rosmead," said their host,

with misdirected earnestness, "you need fear nothing. Mr. Cleeve is a—er—dangerous alarmist. Please forget his flights of imagination, and come up to the ramparts to see the moonlight on the moat. Will you?"

"Oh, yes, please. I should like to immensely."

In another few minutes the whole party wandered forth into the moonlit square, and, escorted by Martin, crossed to a flight of steps leading to one of the bastions. A broad promenade ran along the top, from which they could look over a low parapet into the moat, fifty feet below. Turning to the left, their host escorted them towards a small bungalow built upon the level of the ramparts themselves. As they approached, the sound of a piano floated across the warm, still air. The doors of the house were wide open, and upon the verandah were several arm-chairs inviting repose.

"What an ideal place in which to dream dreams!" murmured Margaret.

"Shs-h!" whispered Martin. "Sit down and listen. He's quite capable of playing for an hour, if left alone. And he plays jolly well, too."

"Chopin's Nocturne in F minor," said Margaret. "Let us sit on the wall, Mr. Gordon, and drink it in —the music, and the night, and all."

Looking down upon the dead glassiness of the moat, and beyond to where the waters of the lagoon shimmered in the moonlight, the scene seemed redolent of the romance of ages. The very spirits of departed Dutch officers, their wives and sweethearts, sat about on every side. Beside the tree at their elbows the spirit forms of a man and a maid whispered sweet nothings beneath its leafy shade. It needed no

imagination to see them. Amidst such an environment their absence would have been much stranger than their presence. The girl, in high ruff and farthingale, was shyly bending her head, her cornflower blue eyes half closed, whilst, leaning over her, a tall soldier in brown jerkin whispered softly into her ear.

The musician paused for a moment, and Martin slipped through the open door. Presently, the seductive notes of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" drifted out into the shadows. Mallory, half asleep in an arm-chair, closed his eyes.

Cicely rose languidly from her chair beneath the portico, stretched her supple figure with indolent grace, and stepped across towards a gun embrasure, where still lay a rusty spiked cannon. Meditatively, she steadied herself with her hand against the gun, and peered into the moat. Desmond slowly dropped from his seat upon the wall and moved towards her. Her slim, white figure, silhouetted against the stone wall, looked like some fairy nymph which might vanish away at the first disenchanting breath of earth.

Desmond's footstep, gentle though it was, aroused her from her reverie. She glanced up quickly and met his gaze. Her eyes, soft and limpid in the moonlight, her half-parted lips, the poise of her head, her whole attitude, half-expectant and appealing for sympathy, touched a chord within his heart which drew him involuntarily nearer to her.

For a moment neither spoke. Then Cicely, breaking into a self-conscious ripple of laughter, again looked down into the depths of the moat.

"What a place to weave romances about!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," he agreed. "It is very difficult for me to realise that three months ago I was enveloped by the musty atmosphere of Lincoln's Inn. The glamour of the East is certainly no myth. I have yielded to its potency without one protesting wriggle, and I don't care how tightly it holds me."

"And so have I," she murmured contentedly.

Some birds rustled in the branches of the tree; a hazy cloud drifted across the moon; the piano ceased; a lizard dropped from the wall with a dull thud; a frog in the moat croaked jubilantly. Martin's voice resounded across the verandah, and the world of reality again asserted itself.

Cicely's eyes twinkled suspiciously.

"But I notice that you are still practising law even out here," she added.

"Practising law?"

"Yes. You are advocating on behalf of Mr. Mallory."

"Ah! At all events, I hope you have given up snubbing him. He is a very good fellow. He—er—comes, I believe of a very good family. He—er—his father appears to be rich. He—"

"Good gracious, what a lot of things," cried Cicely. "But may I ask what all this has to do with me? I have been quite nice to him lately, and we are now acknowledged friends. One must not give him too much. He is rather inclined to want too much." She nodded her head sagely. "Boys are apt to be like that."

"Ah! That is where he thinks his shoe pinches. Is it really too much that he asks, Miss Rosmead?"

For quite half a minute Cicely examined the bricks

of the wall-top. Then she shot one fleeting glance at Desmond's downcast face, and her own face flushed hotly. All signs of mirth had left her. Her glance, grave and troubled, again sought the moat.

"Do you mean," she asked, wearily, "that you would wish me to *marry* Mr. Mallory—should he ask me?"

Desmond lit a cigarette and inhaled its smoke very slowly.

"It is not for me to say that," he replied. "As Mallory was accustomed on the ship to regard Meg as your chaperone—and as I am her brother—I suppose he had some idea that you might listen to my opinion of him." He paused, drew a deep inhalation, and added: "And so—er—I spoke for him."

"Oh, I—see," drawled Cicely. "You were acting in a professional capacity. You hold what I believe is called a *brief* for Mr. Mallory. Is that it?" She laughed merrily. "Have I still got to listen to your address to the jury, or is it all over now?"

"Yes. I only promised to speak once. I fulfilled that promise at Anurādhapura. The remainder must lie with him—and you."

"Well then, I suppose I may congratulate you upon the eloquent way in which you have conducted the case. You did it very nicely."

Suddenly he turned and met her mischievous, laughing eyes. His own were strangely grave, and his lips twitched nervously.

"And you will do—" he began.

Cicely shook her head. "I'll think it over," she replied.

"Ah."

"But, you know," she continued, "I must warn you that I still rather like that other programme which you said was approved of." Her mouth quivered, and from beneath her lashes flashed a coquettish glance of devilment. "I am still thinking of what you called a 'fling.' It sounds, somehow, rather nice. How does one begin, please?"

Desmond smoked on in silence.

"Do help a little," she cried.

"I don't think you are likely to find a beginning difficult," he replied, smiling.

"But I shall need a little teaching, if I am to be a success. You'll tell me when you see me going wrong, won't you?" she pleaded.

"Humph!"

The noise of sudden laughter from the bungalow reached them. Above the other voices could be heard that of Mallory. Involuntarily, Cicely paused to listen. Mallory was evidently telling an Irish story. The *finale* was half drowned by an explosion of laughter. "And the old lady said that with her one tooth she'd back herself to stab a pickled onion, against time, with anybody.—"

A moment later the three men were seen coming from the bungalow. Mallory paused on the verandah and looked comprehensively about him.

"Quick," whispered Cicely. "Here comes Mr. Mallory."

"What am I to be quick about?"

"Your promise to tell me if you see me going wrong."

"I won't."

"You must! It is the duty of a chaperon to do these things."

"I retire from the post forthwith," he replied.

"Your resignation is not accepted," she answered. "Your serious duties are perhaps only beginning. I know I shall need heaps and heaps of help."

Mallory strode across the grass. "Oh, here you are! Mr. Scott is a very good fellow. He has been telling all sorts of good stories. He wants you all to come in and have something to drink."

"All right," replied Desmond. "But I expect it is getting very late, isn't it?"

"I feel as if it was about time to lay me down to sleep," said Cicely. "I hope all those ghosts are safely tucked away in their wells and places for the night."

"Cicely," called Margaret, "come and allow me to introduce Mr. Scott. I am afraid we have been very rude in not presenting ourselves until now."

With a backward, challenging glance at Desmond, Cicely ran lightly across the grass. Mr. Scott was politely offering the use of his piano to Margaret during the time of her visit, and his services in any other capacity in which he could be useful.

He was a dark young man, with a clever face and a pleasing manner. He insisted upon their all partaking of his hospitality, which they were obliged to do. It was, therefore, quite an hour later before Martin's sleepy guests reached their rooms. They had been through a long day, and beds had been never more welcome.

CHAPTER XXII

Jaffna is not noted for its coolness. But then again, it is seldom that there is not a sea breeze to keep the air moving. The ramparts, certainly in the early morning, were delightfully fresh after the heat of the night.

Despite their fears of ghosts, Cicely and Margaret had slept like humming-tops. Martin, smoking a cigarette on the verandah, was patiently awaiting them. Although it was only seven o'clock, the early breakfast of eggs and tea was already on the table in the dining-room. Desmond was the first to appear, but Mallory's voice was still rising in discordant song from the neighbourhood of his bath-room as the girls emerged from their quarters.

Martin's smiling face and cheery manner were extraordinarily infectious; Margaret watched him, and wondered how soon she would be the recipient of the confidences which she could already see lurking in his eyes.

" Who is coming to see the Dutch church ? " asked Gordon, entering the room.

" I'll capture the keys from the old man who looks after the King's House," replied Martin, " and we'll all go together."

The church, being only a stone's throw from the bungalow, could be seen from the verandah, and their host told them what he knew of it as they walked

across. It was a square-built edifice, constructed in the form of a Geneva cross, with a gabled roof.

"The Dutch built the church," said Martin, "in lieu of the Portuguese one of 'Our Lady of Miracles,' which went to ruins. Of course the old Portuguese church was Roman Catholic; this one is Protestant."

Entering the great doorway, they were at once struck by the excellent proportions of the building, which was almost empty. There were no pews or chairs, but on the left of the entrance was a small alcove in which reposed a beautiful bronze bell.

"That," explained Martin, "is the only remnant of 'Our Lady of Miracles.' That and a few memorial stones, which are now in the floor of the nave, were removed here from the old ruins."

They read with reverence the inscriptions upon the rows of stones, wondering what the people who rested there had been like. They appeared to be all officials, but amongst the Dutch ones was one small stone of pathetic interest—to the memory of the seventeen-year old wife of the predicant, or Dutch padre.

"One can quite imagine the Dutch soldiers and their wives," said Margaret, "after listening to a lengthy discourse from some Lutheran divine, hastening up the stairs to promenade upon the ramparts, and gossip away an hour before going home."

"More probably the young ones darted off, leaving the old *vrows* to go home and see that the Sunday dinner was in readiness," remarked Desmond.

"There are also some records of the Ceylon Rifles," said Martin, pointing to the north wall of the nave. "One can see by the dates that they were quartered here in the forties of last century. The regiment is

now disbanded, and when one compares it with that of the Dutch occupation, its history does not interest one one little bit."

"Let us walk along the ramparts now, like our Dutch predecessors," said Margaret. "We can imagine ourselves to be *Vans*, of modest apparel but proud hearts."

"Come along," cried Martin. "We'll walk round the whole wall, and imagine ourselves Dutch or Portuguese as you like."

As he spoke, Martin led the way up the stone steps to the ramparts, from which broad walk could be seen the whole moat, with the open country beyond, stretching in every direction.

Sauntering slowly towards the far side, they came upon a glorious view of the lagoon, spreading before them in all its shimmering morning brilliancy. At its eastern entrance, some ten miles as the crow flies, a round, grey fortress rose out of the very middle of the sea.

"That little fort," explained Martin, climbing on top of the wall, "was once an outpost guarding the entrance to the lagoon It is on a minute island. The Portuguese, who built it, seemed to be rather good at soldiering, but the Dutch captured it, all the same. And when the latter got into it, they prevented any ships coming from Goa with troops to relieve the besieged Portuguese in this fort here."

"Rather nippy, hey?" cried Mallory.

"I will take you for a sail out there to-morrow," said Martin. "We can have tiffin at the Rest House on the island of Kayts, which you see to the left, and sail back with the afternoon breeze."

"I am sure we are back in the sixteenth century

again," remarked Margaret, looking about the ramparts, where there were many ancient cannons. Most of these had been carefully spiked, and were stuck, muzzle down, in the gravel. Still, despite their practical uselessness, they did not fail to witness to a past glory such as the ancient fort was never likely to see again.

Mallory had been inducing Cicely to explore every far corner and retreat. So long as she allowed him to shadow her, he was in the seventh heaven of content. But, try as he would, she would listen to no attempts to lead the conversation into personal channels. The present, with its entrancing points of interest, completely satisfied her desires.

"I cannot imagine a more delightful trip than this," he said, enthusiastically. "When I left home I expected to have a lonely time, but it has all turned out so differently." He sighed deeply. "In fact, I daren't think of the time when it will all come to an end."

"I suppose you will be off to Japan after this?" questioned Cicely, with apparent indifference. "I should like to see Japan. You are a lucky young man. I expect you'll meet lots of nice people, too."

"Don't!" whispered Mallory, with a groan.

Cicely's rounded eyes expressed unbounded astonishment; then she broke into rippling laughter.

"Good gracious! What have I said now?" she asked, innocently.

"Daren't think of it," he moaned. "I simply cannot go East while you go West." He paused, his eyes filled with longing. "I can't do it, Cicely. Unless you positively drive me away, where you go I must go."

"Oh, dear!" she groaned, pathetically. "That seems to throw a dreadful lot of responsibility upon poor me."

"Come to *tiffin*!" interrupted Gordon suddenly. "Do you know, young Cicely, that this is mail day at Jaffna? We have promised to play tennis with Mr. Martin this afternoon, but you have all your English letters to write first, so you had better collect what you are pleased to call your brains immediately after tiffin, and write down your least wicked items of news."

"Brains, indeed!" cried Cicely. "That is immensely rude. Ever since I was a little child and read about the babes in the wood, I have had a very poor opinion of uncles. At this present moment I see no reason to alter my original ideas."

"Fortunately," retorted Gordon, laughing, "nobody's opinion is infallible, not even that of a girl."

"Oh!" exclaimed Cicely, stamping her foot, "If I told you what I really thought of you, it would be so dreadful that I dare not tell you. I will therefore refrain; but I am thinking it all the same—so there!"

"Don't pay any attention to him, Miss Cicely," said Desmond. "He is a brute! Permit me to escort you back to the bungalow. I do not know if such a course is according to precedent, but if it is, I should advise you to cut such a chaperon off without even the usual shilling."

The girl ran lightly down a stone stairway, and Desmond followed.

"I think your advice very good, Mr. Cleeve," she replied. "Please note—to all whom it may concern—that there is a vacancy for a chaperon in the *entourage* of a perfectly charming young woman.

Applicants must be good-tempered and—well—not too dreadfully conscientious regarding duty."

Desmond chuckled softly, and his eyes met Cicely's in amused understanding.

"Any applicants?" she asked.

Desmond smiled, and filled his pipe.

"Must he have good references from a previous employer?" he asked.

"No—um, yes, I think so," she answered, doubtfully.

"Ah! Then I fear I can think of nobody suitable. The only one I have in mind failed miserably in his last place."

Cicely's lips twitched provokingly. "Do you happen to know why?" she inquired. "Perhaps, poor man, he was given to imaginings. I have always noticed that a chaperon who sees things that do not exist, and is blind to those that do, is never—" she glanced upwards with a roguish lift of her eyebrows,—"well—quite satisfactory."

"Poor Gordon!" exclaimed Desmond, solemnly. "No wonder he has failed."

Cicely again suddenly lifted her eyes and searched Desmond's countenance. His gaze, however, remained steadily fixed upon the entrance gate of their host's bungalow, and his face didn't move a muscle.

"Uncle Gerald has nothing to do with my remarks whatever," she said, frowning. "Men are dreadfully stupid. I am so glad I was not born a man."

"So am I," agreed Desmond.

"Oh!" The petulant look upon her face gave way before a wave of delicate pink. "Why?" she demanded.

Desmond suddenly halted on the doorstep. Martin

was already inside, calling for tiffin, and the others were sauntering from the sundial across the grass towards the bungalow.

"Because," whispered Desmond softly, "I would rather that you were your own self than anything else in Heaven or earth."

"Oh!" she gasped. "H'm! Who is flirting now, I should like to know?" She laughed merrily. "You do it very nicely, too. Do you know, I am beginning to think that you must have had a good deal of practice at one time and another."

"Well," he answered, recovering himself, "whatever may have been my wicked past, I feel that I still have lots to learn. By comparison, I feel my ignorance terribly."

"Never mind!" whispered Cicely. "I will teach you to hold your own. Isn't that good of me?"

"If you two want any tiffin, you had better come in out of the sun," interrupted Margaret from the verandah.

CHAPTER XXIII.

In spite of the tropical heat, the tennis proved decidedly exciting. After five o'clock the air grew somewhat cooler, but to those who had never before played the game in the tropics the perspiration to which their bodies soon became reduced was a revelation to them. The courts of rolled earth were also new to them. Mallory, who was accustomed to carry all before him on grass courts in Ireland, found himself not only quickly reduced to a condition of body resembling wet pulp, but was equally reduced in self-esteem by being just one second too late for a service which rose off the hard ground with unbelievable rapidity.

Scott and Martin, having declared themselves the defenders of Jaffna's laurels, challenged all combinations, and won easily. Then Gordon and Cicely, as a family, challenged the Cleeves. This was a hot match in more senses than one. Mallory, as self-constituted umpire and critic, sat on the back of a chair making his comments between Gargantuan draughts of whisky and soda.

Beneath a giant tree the servants had placed a table laden with many fluids, alcoholic and otherwise. The night breeze had not yet arisen, and the earth still gave forth a heat as from newly-baked bricks. The light was rapidly failing, but at last, after Herculean efforts, Gordon and Cicely proved triumphant.

"You look quite hot, Miss Rosmead," said Mallory, facetiously.

"Hot? Of course I look hot," cried Cicely, indignantly, mopping her streaming face with a most ineffective handkerchief. "I'm boiling. I never knew before that one could become so hot—and live. I feel that flames may shoot forth at any moment from my body. Please bring me a drink, someone—something very large indeed, please."

"Oh, dear," gasped Margaret, "I think I must have lost quite half my weight."

Cicely accepted an enormous tumbler filled to the brim with lime squash, and sank into a chair.

"*There*," she cried, presently. "I have temporarily satisfied a thirst that has never before been equalled."

The gentle night breeze rustling the tree tops proved very refreshing when it arose, as they idled for half an hour in luxurious ease in the gathering dusk. The soft tropical night seemed to envelop their souls as well as bodies with its enchanting repose and a sense of indolent irresponsibility.

Cicely sighed happily, and accepted a second lime squash with no apology. Margaret followed suit. According to Mallory, the value of such a glorious thirst was the weight of its quenchable fluid in gold.

That evening they all dined with Mr. Scott. The presence of ladies within the fort was such an unusual occurrence that he had pleaded to be allowed to help entertain them. It was also through him that Martin had obtained the loan of a commodious lateen-sailed boat for their voyage to the mouth of the lagoon on the morrow.

It was early when they sought their beds that night.

The unusual exertion of tennis was telling upon them. Cicely had become so sleepy at ten o'clock that no moonlight effects, or even the fear of ghosts, could have kept her awake one half hour longer.

But the shadow upon the sundial was only at six o'clock the next morning when they were again seated at the breakfast table. Even with a fresh and favourable breeze, it would take them nearly three hours to navigate the winding channel of the lagoon to the village on the island where luncheon would await them. If the breeze failed, they might get no luncheon at all.

An hour later, they stood upon the beach by the turtle house. Boats laden with fish were unloading their spoil as they waited for the boatmen to prepare the boat.

An eager throng of natives wandered hither and thither amongst the flapping fish as they were cast upon the shingle. There and then began the bartering for the sale of the catch. And curious fish they were, too! Never before, outside of a museum collection, had the visitors seen such animals. Two young sharks of three to four feet in length, half a dozen great ugly ray fish, and half a boat-load of a large, scaly form of perch, were spread out for inspection and sale. Amongst these, eight turtles of various sizes reposed unhappily upon their backs. Desmond turned over a couple, who, in slow and solemn fashion, lost no time in heading for the water. These were, however, easily caught, and again joined their powerless brethren in captivity. Martin ordered a couple of them to be sent to the fort, and then preceded the party to the little pier where the boat was waiting.

There was quite a stiff breeze as they embarked. Desmond wished to take the helm, but their host preached patience. A line of white posts, protruding from the water, marked the limitations of the channel, which could be seen winding tortuously in both directions as far as the eye could reach. On either side of this channel, which was not more than twenty yards in width, the shallowness of the water could be gauged by the occasional sight of a man wading. Here and there a boy in a native dug-out canoe anchored to a stake sat fishing in the shallows. Seawards, the great lateen sails of large boats, laden to the water's edge with cargo, were dotted against the horizon.

After watching for a time the evolutions of the old Tamil skipper of their craft, and noting the suddenness with which the shallows merged into the depths of the channel, Desmond claimed the tiller. She was a large boat, accommodating the whole party with comfort in her stern sheets.

Mallory, basking in the shade of the small awning, spread himself upon one of the thwarts, and Cicely was beaming with delight as the boat heeled over to the breeze and rushed through the water. Presently she slipped up to the little forward deck, and, lying prone with her chin upon her hands, watched the wavelets dancing in the sunlight as the bows cleft the clear blue water.

They reached the landing-stage at the island an hour before noon. Transhipping into a row boat, they at once aimed for the little fortress. A couple of native brigantines, the sterns of which rose high above the water like some Spanish galleon of old, floated idly at their anchorage.

"Those little native vessels have probably come from India," said Gordon. "I myself should be very sorry to travel in one of them even so far as that."

"I imagine," said Desmond, "that Columbus's vessel when he crossed the Atlantic could not have been an atom larger than one of those. Think of it! How would you like to go through the Bay of Biscay in that one there, Meg?"

"Ugh! The very thought of it makes me shudder," she replied. "When we return, we must really get off at Marseilles."

"That time, I hope, is so far distant that you need not settle details yet—need you?" murmured Gordon.

"I am only too ready to forget it," she replied. "Life here seems one long peaceful dream."

Except for a native caretaker, the minute island upon which the fort was built was deserted. There was a stone landing jetty, near which a door opened through the wall. The bottom of the enclosure was occupied by deserted barrack rooms, but there was a flight of stone steps leading to the ramparts above, up which raced Cicely. Mallory followed.

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed the latter. "I thought Jaffna was hot, but this place is like a real live oven. I am glad I was not a Dutch soldier a couple of hundred years ago."

"According to Buddhists, you may be one later on," cried Cicely.

"Or a Dutch woman," added Mallory, laughing.

"*Never*! Not even a Dutch one," replied Cicely, scornfully.

The sun, beating down with noonday perpendicu-

larity upon the stone walls and buildings, had heated the place until it really seemed uninhabitable. No doubt the little garrison of the time of its occupation spent much of their leisure ashore. The trees of the village and the roofs of palmyra-thatched huts visible within a mile of the battlements seemed, by contrast, peculiarly inviting. Seawards, there was an uninterrupted view of the channel and open water. A gun or two on such battlements could do much against wooden ships.

"I have had enough of this," exclaimed Margaret. "I'll wait in the boat until you others are ready."

"What excitement it must have been trying to pepper an enemy's ship from here," said Mallory.

"Humph! And trying to dodge cannon balls from the said ship in a space of twenty yards square!" exclaimed Gordon.

"Who's for tiffin?" asked Martin, wiping his perspiring forehead.

"Everybody, I should think," replied Gordon. "At all events, I will risk contradiction by saying so."

"I, for one, am quite ready," cried Desmond. "I do not know if I am representing Shadrach, Meshach, or Abednego, but that in a former state I was one or the other, I have, during the last few seconds, not ceased to doubt."

In another few moments they were all in the boat again, and the crew were bending to their oars. The village, consisting of a police post and a handful of bungalows, was soon reached. The Rest House manager, having been warned, was in readiness for them. A Government official and his friends did not arrive every day at Kayts. The lunch, mostly tinned,

was not luxurious, but they were all hungry, and so forgave much.

"The Rest House keeper has little chance of exercising his clumsy powers, I fear," said Martin, "but he is a decent fellow, and painfully polite. The inhabitants here are very crude. One of them, some little time ago, was so desperately interested in the funeral of the late King Edward that he ventured to beg me to lend him some of the English illustrated papers. On returning them, he wrote me a letter of thanks which was so quaint that I learned it by heart. It ran like this:—

'Dearest Sir,

'I earnestly beg to return the papers you have kindly obliged me yesterday. For such an affection in me God may bless you and bring you every success and much oblige.

'Yours sincerely,

'P. Adam Saibo.'"

"One laughs, naturally," said Margaret, "but could you, Mr. Martin, write even such an appropriate letter as this in Tamil?"

"No, I must acknowledge that I couldn't," replied Martin. "I am quite prepared to admit that Europeans make just as great mistakes as the wretched natives. I heard a story only the other day, which, I fear, has amused us ribald bachelors immensely. A young lady, just arrived by the mail boat from home, went to stay with a married friend in Colombo. On her first night she was very late for dinner. The other guests had arrived, and her hostess was becoming anxious. At last the girl appeared from

her room in a very ruffled state of mind. Her hostess inquired as to what had happened to delay her. 'Oh,' she replied, 'I am so sorry, but, you see, I asked your maid to help me dress, and she was so frightfully stupid, in putting my stockings on inside out, that I am late.' 'But,' replied her hostess, 'I do not understand; I have no maid.' 'Who, then,' asked the girl, 'was that creature with a top knot and comb?' 'Oh,' shouted her hostess, almost in hysterics, 'that was our Cingalese second man servants!' "

Mallory's burst of laughter, intermingling with an attempt to swallow a generous draught of Pilsener beer, threw him into such a choking condition that he fled to the verandah. By the time he had recovered, the others were returning to the boat.

Catching the evening breeze, they sailed back at a spanking pace, reaching the landing-place before sunset.

Cicely, for some reason best known to herself, led Martin away from the others on the way back to the fort, and entered into earnest conversation.

"I believe he is quite as superstitious as anybody," she whispered finally, "and if you can manage it, I am sure he will be quite as frightened as any girl."

"Leave it to me," murmured Martin, chuckling. "I will go off to the chemist's straight away."

"I'll go with you," said Cicely.

"Splendid!" cried Martin, his eyes beaming, "Come along up this side street."

When they entered the fort half an hour later, Martin carried a parcel, and they were still gurgling with confidential laughter. Their faces, however,

had so perfectly assumed their normal expressions by the time they reached the bungalow, that their joke —whatever it was—passed absolutely unnoticed.

* * * * *

It was shortly after midnight when Cicely, chaperoned by Margaret, slipped softly through the door of her bedroom, and tip-toed along the verandah until they met Martin opposite the open window of Mallory's room.

"Look!" whispered Martin, tragically, catching Cicely by the arm and pointing through the window.

Cicely and Margaret, hand in hand, crept up to the window and peered into the darkness as directed. In the shadows of that side of the bungalow it was, despite the moonlight outside, absolutely dark.

"Oh!" gasped Cicely aloud. "How dreadful!"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Margaret, drawing back in fear. "What is it?"

"A ghost!" breathed Martin, suppressing his laughter.

Margaret, taking courage, again approached the window. The dim outline of Mallory's sleeping figure, in his bed, could be seen at the far end of the room, whilst at the near end, propped against the wall near the door, stood an image horrible enough in appearance to frighten the wits out of anyone with a grain of superstition. A white sheet draped what should be the body of the ghost, and the head consisted of what appeared to be a skull marked out in blue phosphorescence.

"Oh, how ghastly!" whispered Margaret.

"Mr. Martin did the head with a piece of black

cardboard and some phosphorus," gurgled Cicely. "It was jolly clever of him."

"Shall I begin?" whispered Martin. "You must be ready to flee as soon as the fun is over. He must not see us."

"I think we ought not to be here at all," protested Margaret.

"Oh, yes, please," begged Cicely. "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

A moment later, Martin, slinking along towards the bedroom door, threw a length of rusty chain heavily on the floor, with a clatter enough to wake any sleeper that ever breathed.

"The ghostly shackles that the poor uneasy spirit carries!" explained Cicely into Margaret's horrified ear.

What Margaret wished to answer was never known, for the chain had hardly fallen when the figure of Jack Mallory was seen to sit up in bed and glare, spell-bound, at the awful apparition leering opposite him. The wretched victim, however, half-asleep, did not waste much time in speculation. With a yell that awoke the rest of the household into terrified trembling, he sprang from his bed and fled away from the ghost towards his bathroom.

Cicely, dragging Margaret, was just on the point of rapidly retreating to her room, when there was a crash, and a noise like a torrent of water, followed by another yell from Mallory.

In a moment the whole household was in an uproar. Martin himself shewed what appeared to be remarkable coolness. Dragging the draped image out into the open, he dexterously thrust it through his own bedroom window and under his bed. Then, running

back to the girls, he began, as Gordon and Desmond reached the scene, to inquire of the servants what had occurred.

"What was that second crash?" whispered Cicely, "I do hope nothing serious has really happened?"

"It was only a kerosene-oil tin, full of water, which I rigged up over his bathroom door to help to cool him if he ran out that way—which I was sure he would," breathed Martin.

"Oh, dear! Poor Mr. Mallory!" murmured Margaret. "He must be drenched to the skin."

The next instant Mallory, unearthed from the bathroom by Desmond, stood on the verandah and attempted to answer questions, the correct replies to which were a sealed book to him.

"Oh, Mr. Mallory, what *have* you been doing?" cried Cicely in well-feigned surprise.

"I saw"—he stammered impotently.

"Not a ghost?" inquired Cicely quickly.

"I thought I saw—"

"Look here, old chap," laughed Desmond, "you have evidently been having nightmare, and you have frightened us all half out of our senses. How did you get so wet? Have you been in your bath?"

"I'm off to bed," cried Cicely with unusual haste. "Come, Margaret! Mr. Mallory has been seeing ghosts. I hope I shan't yell like that if I see any. Good night.

In a few minutes, Martin, having lit a lamp and helped Mallory into dry pyjamas, had quieted the household. The mystery, however, was by no means cleared up to Mallory's satisfaction, and he absolutely declined to return to his bed until Martin had dropped

a broad hint as to the nature of the apparition which had frightened him.

The household assembled at breakfast some hours later, as if nothing had happened. Mallory, who in broad daylight was beginning to think that he had behaved like a coward, blushed scarlet as he met Cicely's kind inquiries after his health.

"Don't pay any attention to them, Mr. Mallory," said Margaret. "They would all have been frightened at the same thing, I am quite sure."

"Well, I suppose I may as well acknowledge that I was frightened," admitted Mallory, with remarkable good temper. "I think I might have been let off that shower bath, though."

"So do I," whispered Cicely. "And I will be unusually nice to you all day to make up for it. We were brutes, weren't we?"

CHAPTER XXIV

Cicely sat at the piano softly playing the "Salut d'Amour" waltz. Mallory, leaning over the back of the instrument, pensively watched her. The girl had apparently forgotten his presence.

They had returned at dark from a game of tennis, filled with a consciousness of having earned their dinner, and being quite ready for it too. After dinner, Martin had pleaded for music. Cicely and Mallory had run on ahead, and invaded Mr. Scott's drawing-room like a mild whirlwind.

Margaret, escorted by Martin and Scott, was sitting upon a dismounted cannon, listening to the views of the former upon the chronic loneliness of bachelorhood in the Tropics, and Jaffna Fort in particular. Margaret was proving very sympathetic, and Martin grew proportionately discursive. Desmond and Gordon smoked in silence, listening to the strains of the dreamy waltz drifting out into the silence of the night.

Desmond had been very silent all day. Since his remarks to Cicely of the previous morning, he had avoided the girl as much as politeness would allow. To himself he described his conduct as having been nothing less than that of indefensible flirting. To advocate Mallory's cause at one moment, and then to practically lose his own head at the next was contemptuous, if not actually dishonourable. If he was

to be liable to that sort of thing, the more he kept out of Cicely's way the better. He might end by being a fool, but he would see that he did not become a knave as well. To pay a compliment such as he had done was, of course, nothing. So argued common-sense. "But," intervened conscience, again refusing to slumber—"had he meant nothing more than an ordinary compliment, such as might be paid to any pretty girl?" Whatever he had meant, he promised himself that until Mallory had taken his chance, his conscience should have nothing to reproach him with. The girl's open confidence in the value of his opinions, her charming attempts to draw him out of himself and share the charm of her youthful gaiety with his dull soul, was leading him to live upon her presence to a degree that was daily increasing. To mistake her untrammelled friendliness for any deeper feeling would be but ridiculous conceit, not to be harboured by a sane man for an instant. That there was, therefore, any renunciation in his attempts to further Mallory's cause he steadfastly refused to believe.

The shaded lamp threw a mellowed light upon the whiteness of Cicely's neck and rounded arms as her fingers gently caressed the keys. Her face, half in shadow, seemed unusually thoughtful. Ever and again, as she glanced slowly upwards to meet Mallory's steady gaze, and again bent to the keyboard, her face assumed a look of troubled indecision. Lately, Jack Mallory had shown disturbing symptoms.

For a few moments she played without either of them speaking. From outside could be heard the low hum of conversation. The waltz finished, Cicely sighed softly, and began to play "Braga's Serenade."

"You look perfectly splendid to-night," whispered Mallory, suddenly.

Without answering at once, she looked critically upwards at his beaming face, and then laughed provokingly.

"Which is best—splendid or ripping, I wonder?" she said. "Let me see—the last time you honoured me with your eloquent admiration, I think I was 'ripping,' wasn't I? Have you ever considered that some day some girl will imagine your compliments to be in earnest?"

"Earnest? Why, of course I am in earnest. You not only look ripping, but I know that you are—er—a perfect ripper too. If I could only express my thoughts properly I could say much more. In earnest? Why, I am thinking of nobody else but you from morning till night."

From beneath Cicely's lashes, a glance, not strictly devoid of coquetry, met his ardent eyes.

"And what about from night till morning?" she asked, demurely.

"It, is just the same, at any time," he stammered.

Cicely slowly shook her head. For a few moments, with her eyes upon the piano, she continued to play.

"Do you know," she said, presently, "I am actually beginning to think that you are deceiving yourself into believing that you really like me seriously. You don't really mean half you say, of course, nor do you—"

"I mean a great deal more than I say," he interrupted, huskily. "I—er—"

"You think you do—particularly at the moment," admitted Cicely. "To-day you think it is I. I wonder who it will be to-morrow?"

"There can be no change to-morrow, Cicely," he asserted, vehemently. "It must, for always, be as to-day, and as it was yesterday, and all the days. You *must* believe me. I swear I have never before—"

"But I am sure you will again," she intervened, quietly. "When that time comes I shall be very much interested. I hope she will be a nice girl. You know, you have promised to be a friend of mine *always*; haven't you? Well, that means that you must confide in me. You can't think how nice a confidante I can be. When you meet the girl that is to be 'for keeps' you'll tell me all about her, I'm sure. Now, don't say you didn't promise, because you did."

"Yes—I suppose I did. That is, in a way I did," he stammered in confusion. "But I didn't mean what you did."

"Oh?" she cried, raising her eyebrows interrogatively. "You can't mean that, after all, you do not wish to be friends?"

Mallory extracted a yellow Fraginapani blossom from a vase and pulled it to pieces. "I have heaps of friends," he answered. "But none of them are like you."

"That's rather nice; I'm glad of that. I should like to be No. 1 friend."

For a few moments Mallory remained strangely silent. Cicely raised her eyes at last in wonder. He stepped nearer the front of the piano and leant over her. Instinctively she read his purpose. Suddenly her fingers crashed upon the keys and the opening bars of a rollicking American two-step dance filled the room.

But Jack Mallory had now got the bit between his

teeth. He could see nothing but that within a foot of him was Cicely's supple young figure, and that was all the world to him. Oblivious of the open door and of those whom the sudden stoppage of the piano might attract, he leaned across and seized her hands.

"Ah, but it isn't friendship! It is love that I want," he cried.

Across the girl's flushed face there spread a wave of half fear, half sadness. In her glance was a pathetic appeal that even he could not mistake. Her voice, soft and pleading, stayed him.

"Oh, *don't*. *Please* don't, Mr. Mallory. You mustn't spoil it all. I like you so much, that I don't wish to lose you like this. *Please* understand."

A light step sounded on the verandah. Mallory involuntarily dropped Cicely's hands. A second later Margaret's laughing voice broke the stillness.

"Good gracious, Cicely! If you propose desecrating such a peaceful scene as this by that sort of rowdy music, I really must claim the piano."

"I wish you could often desecrate it in the same way, Miss Rosmead," called Martin over Margaret's shoulder. "That would be glorious to dance to. We don't get such things as dances in this benighted spot."

"Oh," cried Cicely, leaving the piano, and walking outside, "You must come to Nuwera Eliya for February week, Mr. Martin. We are all going. I'll dance with you there, and try to make it up to you for all your want of gaiety here, if you will ask me."

"Oh!" grunted Mallory, beneath his breath.

"You mustn't be too nice to him, Miss Rosmead," said Scott. "You can't imagine how depressed he

will be after you have gone. If you spoil him now, he will be all the worse during the usual reaction."

"He is talking rubbish, Miss Rosmead," stammered Martin.

"You remember the misanthropic small boy who said that he was going into the garden to eat worms because nobody loved him." continued Scott, unheeding. "Well, that is sure to be Martin's condition when you have all gone. I shall have to feed him on hairy caterpillars. Fortunately, they are cheap here."

Margaret laughed softly, and, slipping her arm through Cicely's, wandered back to the wall of the ramparts. Gordon and Desmond, who had been sitting upon the wall discussing politics, made room for them.

Cicely suddenly became silent. She listened idly to the desultory conversation, but her thoughts were her own. She could not be happy regarding Mallory. That she had hurt him seriously she couldn't believe. But to hurt him at all made her uncommonly miserable. She had warned him as best she could. In that her conscience was clear. But her tender heart couldn't rest there. To make him happy again would have to be her object. She glanced upwards at the starry heavens and sighed. Even the peaceful old-world of Jaffna could be all awry sometimes.

The waters of the moat flickered in the night breeze; a water rat swam across to a clump of rushes; a couple of crows shifted their positions in the tree top. A light, here and there, in some native dwelling of the town accentuated the dark outlines of the palmyra groves. The roof of the Dutch church rose above the ramparts within a few yards of where they sat. From the lagoon there floated landwards a soft, cool breeze.

Above all was the deep purple of a tropical sky that seemed to exhibit a fresh myriad of stars with every tick of the clock.

As they sauntered down the steps and back to Martin's bungalow, Cicely detached herself from Margaret and walked silently beside Desmond. The latter had been watching the poise of her head and her downcast face for some time. He could see at a glance that there was something troubling her. He knew that she would speak when she was ready. He was in no hurry. During the past weeks he had become accustomed to read her moods, and he was gifted with that sympathy which knows the value of silence in season.

They were half across the square before she looked up at him.

"Well?" he questioned. "You are very thoughtful."

"Yes. I am not at all happy," she replied, slowly. "Mr. Mallory has been troublesome. I am afraid I have hurt him."

"Oh!"

"He wants more than I can give him, and he won't understand."

Desmond looked down at her bent head and bare white shoulders. For some moments he seemed to be studying her minutely. His lips were firmly set. Several times he seemed to be on the point of speaking, and then to change his mind.

"You don't think I should say things I cannot mean, do you?" continued Cicely, at last.

"You should speak the truth at any cost. You are not the sort of girl not to know what that truth is." Desmond again relapsed into silence, but it was

obvious by the movements of his lips that he had not finished.

Cicely glanced upwards expectantly.

"Perhaps you will—er—think more of Mr. Mallory as you get to know him better."

"Not in that way," asserted Cicely, shaking her head, decidedly.

"Humph! In any case I don't think that a young girl should ever consent to marry a man unless she thinks that he is the only man in the world for her. He may not be so, but she should, at the time, think so. Otherwise, later on, she may meet such a man, and then it will be too late. If a girl is not young, and has never found such a man, then I think that, perhaps, she may be forgiven if she cares to accept somebody from off a lesser pedestal." His voice grew very earnest. "I would be the very last to urge Jack Mallory's claims unless you could feel like that towards him."

Cicely stopped at the gate and leaned back reflectively against the railings. She raised her hands behind her head and sighed deeply.

Desmond turned away almost petulantly, and looked forth into the night.

"If not Mallory, then some other man will come," he murmured. "You must wait. I expect there is such a man somewhere."

Cicely dropped her hands and traced a pattern on the ground with the toe of her slipper.

"Yes, I expect there is," she said, softly, to herself.

CHAPTER XXV

In fishing and sailing on the lagoon, and in visiting the native portions of the town, two more days were passed in semi-idleness. They saw Jaffna cigars being rolled, and even smoked them. There was, in fact, nothing more to see in Jaffna, but the spell of its tropical inertia held them in such an irresponsible trance that they were loth to leave. At last, however, despite much bemoaning on the part of their host, the day for departure actually arrived.

They started very soon after day-break. Practically the only way back was by the same road through Anuradhapura and Trincomalee, and as Gordon wished, if fortune favoured them, to reach the latter place that night, there was no time for delay.

For some days Mallory had been steeped in gloom. But it would have to be a very serious blow indeed that would keep him in the same state of mind for many days on end. The joyousness of his boisterous spirit was such that an amusing or exciting incident of the road seldom failed to involuntarily elevate him from the depths. Cicely had been silently noting his condition. She was troubled at first, but as the days following upon his outbreak in Scott's bungalow passed, the puckered lines of thought between her eyes grew momentarily fewer. She could not read what was in his mind, but it was easy to see that his

journey was in no way being spoiled by the recent episode of failure. Of the fact that Mallory's optimistic temperament urged him on to future attempts upon Cicely's heart, and thereby raised his hopes once more into the highest altitudes, the girl was ignorant, but that he was rapidly recovering his happiness was enough to satisfy her troubled conscience.

Mallory occupied the seat by the driver all the way to Anuradhapura. The journey was hot and monotonous, and they were very glad, at length, to find themselves seated at tea in the hotel. The suggestion of Gordon that they should revisit some of the dagabas was met by such a succession of groans from Mallory, and even by a smiling protest from Margaret, that the original programme was adhered to, and the car started off at once upon the long road of seventy miles to Trincomalee.

They were all more than ready for their dinner by the time Trinco' Rest House was reached. It was quite dark, and the meal had been ready for some time. Tamby greeted them effusively, and Mallory drank his health in the largest whisky and soda obtainable. There was no moon, and in any case they were much too tired to leave the bungalow that night, so shortly after dinner they one and all drifted off to bed.

The early morning again saw them under way. The glassy calmness of the harbour, and the temptations of fishing and sailing which the place held out to them as they walked forth into the first flush of sunlight were so alluring, that they longed to loiter on in indolent happiness. Gordon, however, refused to be tempted. The role of a cicerone is notoriously that of master rather than servant. The "man from Cook's" must

not be thwarted. Gordon had to be back on his estate on a certain day. He had also accepted an invitation for the whole party to dine with the officers at their mess at Diyatalawa Camp for the next evening. So, with laughing complaints concerning their lately-acquired Eastern habits of sloth, he hustled the party into the car and rushed through the deserted roads of Trincomalee at top speed.

"We are now on the road which leads by the coast-line to Batticaloa," explained Gordon. "We will have an early tiffin there, tea at Mahaoya, and reach the Rest House at Badula to-night. I don't suppose one of you have looked at the map."

"Of course not," cried Cicely. "You really do tell it so nicely, Uncle Gerald, that to listen to you is ever so much better than looking at any map. When you tell us about things that we are to visit, I can almost see the whole thing in front of me as you speak."

"When I was a little girl," answered Gordon, "it was always considered very wrong to try to pull one's uncle's leg."

"Oh, was it!" cried Cicely. "I am glad I didn't live in those prehistoric days. How dreadfully dull it must have been for girls with uncles!"

"Ugh!" groaned Gordon. "What sins have I committed that I should be burdened with such a niece? In some former Buddhistic existence I must have been dreadfully wicked, I fear, for I am quite sure that no offences of my present life could possibly meet the case."

The road was passing through a beautiful vista of park-like jungle. Tree-fringed tanks spread out before them. The bantering conversation died a

natural death as every moment brought forth increasing beauties of forest and lake.

Motor cars were evidently no strangers at the place. Gordon ran the car to the bank of a river and stopped. Across the water could be seen a large raft. A whistle from Peter aroused the ferrymen from their siesta. They set to work deliberately to haul upon a rope, and the raft slowly crossed over. It was quite easy to run the car aboard, and with half a dozen coolies wading in the water and pulling the craft by the long rope, the other side was reached and the journey resumed. Several of these ferries were crossed that morning.

Batticaloa was found to be a picturesque little place. Except, however, for the presence of a few sailing ships in the open roadstead, and the weekly arrival of the touring steamer, which conveys trippers round the island, it is a deserted spot. The large native bazaar fringes a long lagoon, running parallel with the coast line. Through the one street of uninteresting native shops Gordon steered the car slowly.

They delayed half an hour for tea at the Rest House at Mahaoya, in the heart of the jungle country. The aspect later in the day, became more open, until tea and paddy fields began to take the place of wilderness.

The western heavens were still suffused with the dying crimsons and violets and the golden sheen of unearthly glories as the car ran into the valley of Badula, but in the East, over the tea-hills, the sky-line was already (but for the presence of a twinkling star or two) in densest purple. Since leaving Batticaloa, the road had risen some two thousand feet.

Badula, as being in early history a large centre of the Cingalee Kingdom, possesses a sentimental interest, but otherwise it presents no features to tempt the

traveller to dally within its precincts. Gordon had elected to spend a night at the Rest House, as the road to the military camp at Diyatalawa was bad and all uphill.

It was a dull evening. Everybody was physically and mentally tired. Mallory was temporarily enveloped by a fit of depression. Desmond was still strangely silent. Margaret and Gordon, after dinner, disappeared towards the far end of the verandah. Cicely, heaving a sigh indicative of boredom and the eccentricities of the other sex in general, gave in to the inevitable, and composed herself to sleep in a long arm-chair.

The club, a couple of shops, a few government buildings, and a small race-course comprised practically the whole of Badula. As there was no special planters' meeting or call for a festive occasion that night, the planters, whose bungalows could be seen dotted sparsely about on the surrounding hills, had evidently no intention of emerging from their strongholds. The club was consequently deserted, and bed afforded the only escape from unprofitable thought.

Badula possesses one interesting feature, and this Gordon took them to see before breakfast in the morning. In the disused European cemetery is a tree which has grown about the tombstone of a female relative of a civil servant, the stone being entirely embedded in the great trunk of the tree as in a complete frame.

"It has a strangely protective appearance," said Margaret, "as if Nature was determined that no devastating hand of time should possibly desecrate the memorial erected to a gentle heart, who, for all we know, may have tended the tree in its infancy."

"The tree certainly looks," added Desmond, "as if it intends to hang on until the last trump shall shake it loose."

The car met them at the cemetery gate. There was no necessity for hurry, but as there was equally no object in loitering in Badula, they decided to depart immediately after breakfast.

The distance from Badula to the camp was only about twenty-five miles, but the road was rough. Winding steadily uphill, several tea-factories and estates were passed on the left, where lay the valley. Before them, as they slowly ascended, rose the mighty hills of tea and open patna land. For two thousand feet the road climbed unintermittently, then, suddenly turning a corner, it shot forwards and reached the summit of the pass.

"Banderawella!" ejaculated Gordon. "This is the terminus of the railway line from Colombo."

The view which now spread out as far as the eye could reach was of a variety that, as yet, they had not seen in Ceylon. A valley, interspersed with bright green patches of rice fields and occasional clumps of trees concealing clusters of native huts, formed the centre of the picture. In the valley, a couple of miles from the village of Banderawella, whose few scattered houses, railway station, and Rest House now surrounded them, could be seen the roofs of huts, some white and some red, separated like the black sheep from the white.

"There you are!" said Gordon. "There's the old Boer Camp. During the war there were several thousand Boer prisoners here. The red huts were occupied by the British regiments on guard, and in those white tin ones lived the Boers they guarded.

The whole camp was surrounded by barbed wire entanglements and sentries, but the wretched prisoners had little chance of escaping, in any case. To wander about these uninhabited hills, miles and miles from a decent sea-port, in an attempt to escape, would have been a hopeless venture. Some of them did try to wander at first, but after a time they learned the futility of it, and gave their paroles not to escape. A reward was offered for the capture of any escaping Boer, but there was little money earned in that way by watchful planters or natives. There was a planter, over on the hill there above the camp, who caught one, and, after that, he seems to have become possessed with the lust of capture and consequent profit. History relates that, one morning, he met two Boers wandering on his estate. Smelling plunder at once, he, with subtle promptitude, invited them to breakfast. They accepted the invitation with hungry alacrity. Whilst they were filling themselves with the best of good viands, he sent for the military police. When the latter arrived, he handed over the Boers and demanded the advertised rewards, whereupon his guests nonchalantly produced their legitimate passes entitling them to be exactly where they were."

"Sucks!" ejaculated Mallory.

"A vulgar word!" exclaimed Cicely, "but, I admit, expressive on this one occasion only."

"From the hill, where you see the British huts, electric searchlights could be turned on to the Boer lines at night, and, in fact, the whole district could be kept almost as light as day," continued Gordon. "The prisoners were very quiet on the whole, but they had one or two serious outbreaks which required some force to quell. Those roads, which you can see cut in

the sides of the hills, were made by them. They were paid for their labour by means of tickets with which they could buy things at the regimental canteen in the camp. They were never allowed money, as, of course, that might help them to escape. They were so well fed and looked after that when peace was eventually declared they couldn't, for some time, be induced to believe that the war was at an end. Their friends wrote to them from South Africa, but still they refused to believe, and they wouldn't take the oath of allegiance, which was necessary before they could return to South Africa. We got rid of them all at last, but there is still one old irreconcilable who has never taken the oath, and who loafs about Nuwera Eliya to this day as a self-constituted exile. This country looks extraordinarily like parts of the Natal veldt. All those conical bare hills rising up, each one so very like its neighbour, between us and Nuwera Eliya, are very like African kopjes. Our people couldn't have chosen a more home-like environment for the exiled prisoners than this if they had hunted the world over."

"I am glad they were kind to the poor things," said Margaret.

"Kind! I should think they were," cried Gordon. "The Boers got everything they wanted. The contractors for food were paid, it would seem, almost any price they cared to ask for supplies. Unfortunately, we are now all sufferers in consequence, because the purveyors, up-country, have done their best to keep to the Boer prices ever since."

The car slipped slowly down the incline by a road which wound about the side of a hill. The coolness of the air after the heat of the low country was delight-

fully invigorating. Lazy, fleecy clouds floated eastwards.

The road from the Diyatalawa railway station dropped rapidly into the camp. Passing lines of white huts, Gordon pointed to these as the Naval barracks. Blue-jackets, beaming with cheery content, were engaged in a cricket match. A company of Indian native Infantry marching back from the field looked with interest at the motor.

"This is a perfect heaven for sailors," said Gordon. "They are sent here in batches from Colombo as they return each year from the Persian Gulf. Imagine being cooped up in a little gunboat for, perhaps, five months, in the climate of the gulf, without once getting ashore, waiting to catch gun-runners! There is a little military Rest House here which a Sapper friend of mine has put at your disposal for the night, Miss Cleeve. We men can easily get some sort of accommodation in the officers' quarters on the hill."

He pulled up the car as he spoke. A small hut, surrounded by a garden, formed the Rest House. It only contained one bedroom, but there was a living-room where tiffin was already waiting for all. The Sapper officer, Captain Seymour, was on duty at the moment, but had left word for them not to wait for him. When at length he arrived to welcome them in person, he brought the news that there was to be a little tennis tournament in their honour that afternoon, at the regimental mess, and he hoped they would have tea with him in his hut before they started.

After lunch, Gordon induced the party to walk to the Boer cemetery. The day was so cool and fresh that it seemed a pity to waste it in after-luncheon sleep, so, without delay, Seymour led the way down the

straight road, which ran between the British huts on the one side and the empty Boer ones on the other.

The cemetery, neatly fenced and shaded by trees, was on the outskirts of the camp. The silent record which it afforded of those who for a couple of long years had lived close by was strangely pathetic. As the visitors entered its little gate they could see, in imagination, the funeral gun-carriage before them, which so many times must have rumbled across the threshold of that village of exiled dead.

Four symmetrical rows of white wooden crosses occupied the one side of the cemetery. These were all alike, except that, here and there, the wood was replaced by a marble cross. These latter, as could easily be seen, had been privately paid for from South Africa at the end of the war. The names upon them were mostly Dutch, but suddenly Captain Seymour came to a halt before a marble cross, and read aloud a Scotch name.

"Aged only seventeen, and Scotch!" he said, laconically.

"Yes," added Gordon, "A friend of mine here met the boy and recognised him. The wretched lad had not communicated with his people, who lived in Scotland. He was apparently very reticent as regards how he happened to be fighting for the Boers. He died of enteric fever."

"Poor boy!" murmured Margaret. "I suppose he had run away from home, and was led on to fight by the others."

Silently they continued their way between the rows of neatly-kept graves. There were over a hundred of them. Each cross bore the name of the deceased, the

name of his African locality, his birth date, and death date.

"By Jove!" muttered Desmond, "the poor beggars must have had a very depressing time when this enteric outbreak overtook them. Just look at the dates! Why, there was a funeral every day, and sometimes two at once. Here is Christmas eve, Christmas day, and Boxing day, each with its death. Although their people were killing our friends and relatives in South Africa at the same moment, the sight of these records to me is none the less pathetic."

Crossing the central path, Gordon pointed to the opposite side of the cemetery enclosure. Almost an equal number of graves to those of the Boers faced them. But the crosses and tombstones were not the same, and the records upon them were in fuller detail.

"There lie those who died during their guardianship of the Boers, and since. You will see several regiments represented, and also a few naval graves—also some officers."

"Who's for the return journey?" cried Mallory. "I've had enough of this."

Cicely looked up at Mallory's depressed countenance and smiled slightly.

"I had thought, Mr. Mallory," she said, with delightful innocence, "that at present you rather preferred melancholy to anything else. You have been dreadfully dull lately."

Mallory's face expressed surprise. This frontal attack, after what had happened, was more than he could understand. He had imagined that Cicely would on no account dream of referring to his disappointment. That she had smilingly done so required some thought for elucidation. Was she asking him

to return to his allegiance to her? Before, however, he could quicken his wits sufficiently to formulate a suitable answer, the girl had joined Desmond and was already half-way to the gate. Mallory shook his head indecisively and followed, deep in reflection.

CHAPTER XXVI

Desmond stood in admiration before a picture which hung upon the wall of Captain Seymour's little bachelor sitting-room. Upon the verandah tea was being dispensed by Margaret, the others having disposed themselves in what chairs the hut afforded. The view from the verandah embraced the whole camp. Upon the hill, where the hospital and the officers' mess stood, they could see the preparations already in progress for tennis. The sun was beginning to throw lengthening shadows over the hill tops. The sounds of activity from the camp at their feet arose like a hum of bees upon the rarefied atmosphere.

For some moments Desmond studied the picture on the wall intently. It was a coloured copy of a painting recently exhibited in the Paris Salon. The exquisite face of a young girl, her head thrown back and her luxuriant dark hair loose about her forehead, looked out from the paper. Her large eyes, shaded by thick lashes, were half shut, and her chin was lifted towards the face of a man, the top of whose head was alone visible. There was not the faintest suspicion of voluptuousness in the attitude. Nothing could be seen of the girl but the face, and it portrayed the yielding to a first kiss.

Presently Cicely stood at his elbow.

"Don't you want any tea, oh chaperon?" she asked, flippantly.

"Do you like that?" enquired Desmond, ignoring her question.

"That picture?"

"Yes, the face of the girl?"

Cicely put her head on one side and studied the picture critically.

"Yes, rather," she admitted. "She has beautiful eyes."

Desmond laughed softly.

"M—m, I'm glad you like them," he replied. "There is a mischievous twinkle of beauty in them that appeals to me immensely. And yet you can see depths of sympathy within them also, of trustful yielding, which is very alluring—and sometimes very tantalising."

"Oh," exclaimed Cicely, wonderingly. "How can you see so much in a picture? They are beautiful eyes, but one cannot see all that."

"*I* can."

"Oh! Come to tea!"

Suddenly Desmond turned away from the picture and looked at Cicely.

"Do you, by any chance, happen to be acquainted with anybody whose eyes are remarkably like those of the girl in the picture?" he asked.

Cicely glanced up at him in mute interrogation. Her forehead was puckered in thought; she slowly shook her head from side to side. Desmond's lips twitched humorously. For a few seconds neither spoke. Then suddenly across the girl's face spread a delicious blush, and she dropped her tell-tale eyes to the floor.

"No—I can think of nobody at all," she replied.

"*I* can," he said.

"It wasn't fair to lay a trap like that for me," she stammered. "Besides, I—er—said that the eyes of the girl in the picture were beautiful, but I don't admit that mine are like them."

"They are wonderfully like," he whispered.

Cicely moved slowly towards the door. On the threshold she paused, and, looking provokingly over her shoulder, broke into a characteristic trill of laughter.

"Do you realise," she asked, "that this is the third compliment you have paid me? The other two, if you remember, were at Kanthalai Lake and Jaffna. You are developing rapidly. Do you know, I really believe I could teach you to flirt quite nicely. Is it very wicked for a chaperon to flirt?"

"Wicked or not, I wouldn't try," he replied.

"Why?" she whispered.

Desmond's gaze sought the distant hills. All trace of amusement had suddenly left his countenance. For the space of a dozen heart-beats he was silent. Then he dropped from the clouds, and stepped very close to her.

"Because," he murmured, "I dare not—with *you*."

"Tea, Desmond?" called Margaret.

"Er—yes—thanks," he answered, mechanically following Cicely on to the verandah.

A few minutes later the party, escorted by Captain Seymour, climbed the path to the mess. There was only one tennis court, but even by the time they arrived quite a little crowd of players had assembled. Half-a-dozen naval officers, a few planters, three ladies, and the members of the mess itself were all eager for the fray.

Gordon's friends were enthusiastically welcomed.

Mallory was at once seized upon by the Irish subaltern whose society at the hotel dinner in Colombo he had at the time so little appreciated. As the latter clearly had not in the least forgotten Cicely, it looked as if Mallory might soon again have cause for jealousy. A couple of young naval officers, who had been at the same dance, also claimed acquaintanceship. In fact, in a few moments both of the girls were surrounded by an enthusiastic bevy of officers, offering refreshments and making themselves generally agreeable.

The afternoon passed pleasantly and rapidly; there was no room for dullness. After being so long away from any society more exciting than Jaffna fort had been able to provide, this little gathering seemed to Gordon's party quite an event.

The various sets of tennis had to be hurried through on account of the light, but all managed to get a turn. Then out on the terrace in front of the mess hut they sat in the after-glow of the sunken sun, and watched the wondrous heavenly beauty of golden cloud hanging about the hill peaks, whilst silent-footed Indian servants dispensed many drinks of Eastern origin.

The time passed so quickly that Gordon jumped to his feet in surprise as the notes of a bugle-call resounded from behind the mess hut.

"By George!" he cried. "There's the dressing bugle. You girls will have to hurry. Dinner will be ready in half-an-hour."

"Don't let him worry you, Miss Cleeve," said Seymour. "They would no more think of beginning dinner before you arrive than they would attempt any other impossible feat of mental strength. Your presence at dinner is an event in history. The society

of ladies at a mess dinner is such an unheard-of episode that this will be for ever remembered in the annals of the regiment."

"It sounds rather terrifying," laughed Margaret.

"I should describe it as sounding rather nice," said Cicely, turning to Mallory's subaltern friend. "I am quite sure it cannot be terrifying if you are there, Mr. Barry, can it?"

"Glorious, I call it," shouted the latter, boisterously. "You sit by me, Miss Rosmead, and we'll have the time of our lives."

"You won't get any dinner at all if we don't go and dress," grumbled Mallory.

"*Au revoir* then, Mr. Barry," cried Cicely. "I must be off."

Half-an-hour later the regimental band, stationed outside the long mess building, played "The Roast Beef of Old England" and the guests filed in to dinner. Besides Margaret and Cicely, there were two other ladies—wives of the officers—present. Neither of the visitors had ever been in an officers' mess before. A dinner is a dinner all the world over. There is, however, a fascination about the unfamiliar which appeals strongly to most people.

To be present at a function where it is notorious that, as a rule, only men are invited, is, to ladies, bound to be peculiarly fascinating. The long mess table, laden with regimental plate, the regimental colours hanging from the wall, the uniforms of the officers, and a hundred and one other details of the unaccustomed added a zest to a meal which otherwise would have been perhaps less palatable than ordinary.

The senior Major captured Margaret. Cicely found herself being escorted by the Adjutant on one side and

the exuberantly-jubilant Mr. Barry on the other. Mallory had been so "ridden off," as Barry expressed it, that he found himself at the far end of the table before he knew where he was.

Cicely was filled with a wild spirit of gaiety. The band played seductively. The champagne glasses, filled and refilled by the watchful Indian khit-maghars, were smilingly raised by her *vis-à-vis* to drink her health. The usual light banter of the mess table flowed unceasingly. Various peculiarities of the younger subalterns, mostly with reference to their amorous susceptibilities, were good-humouredly discussed. Mr. Barry, with much blushing vehemence, had to defend himself against a host of attacks. Cicely laughed, and joined the others in refusing to accept his denials. Desmond, from the other end of the table, caught her glance once or twice, and returned her smile. That she was thoroughly enjoying herself was obvious. That Mallory's condition was the reverse was equally apparent.

The menu was a long one, but at last there was a pause. The servants cleared the table, and, deftly removing the long slips of white cloth, left nothing but the silver candelabra and centre pieces shining upon the polished mahogany table.

The decanters circulated rapidly, and every glass was filled; then came a pause in the conversation. Cicely stopped in the middle of a sentence and looked about her inquiringly. Suddenly the voice of the officer sitting at the head of the table relieved the momentary tension.

"Mr. Vice, the King!" he cried. rising to his feet.

"Gentlemen, the King!" came the answer.

Everybody rose and held aloft a brimming glass.

From outside rose the strains of the National Anthem. Then, with one accord, came the usual toast:—

"The King! God bless him!"

A moment later, the babel of conversation was again in full swing.

Cicely sighed audibly. The little ceremony, so customary to the officers about her, was one in which she had never before shared. The sudden change from gay laughter to what sounded to her like a solemn prayer, and back again to the usual banter, had been so unexpected that she had been left for the moment speechless.

Prolonged silence, however, within any reasonable radius of the men on either side of her was impossible. The band broke into the "Mon Cheri" waltz. Unconsciously the girl's feet began to step to the music, and as she encountered Desmond's glance once more she met a challenging invitation.

CHAPTER XXVII

"We have ordered the ante-room to be cleared, Miss Rosmead," whispered the Adjutant. "The floor is not at all bad. We wish to take advantage of what is a most unexpected chance in this forsaken spot, and dance."

"Oh, how lovely!" exclaimed Cicely, fixing him with delighted eyes.

"I am glad you think so," he laughed. "May I have the pleasure of the first one, please?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Come along, then. We'll lead the way," he replied, pushing back his chair.

"Oh, I say, Miss Rosmead," cried Barry. "This isn't fair. I can't miss the chance of a lifetime like this. Don't go. In any case, please promise me some too before the others come along."

"All right," replied Cicely, smiling over her shoulder.

"Three, please," he whispered, following her.

"What cheek!" ejaculated her partner. "Don't give the young thruster more than one at the most. You'll be bored to death if you do."

Laughingly shaking her head at Barry, she was immediately whirled into the waltz by her impatient partner. A few moments later most of the others had also joined in the dance. Some who failed to get ladies danced with each other. A batch of ribald subalterns played leap-frog on the verandah.

Desmond and Mallory were both late in leaving the table. The latter moodily retreated to the verandah. Desmond unintentionally met Cicely as she emerged, panting and delighted, from the dancing-room. The light of merriment shone jubilantly from her eyes, and her cheeks were flushed with excitement.

"Oh, there you are, Mr. Cleeve," she cried. "Are you going to ask me to dance to-night?"

"If it is only asking that is required, I will keep on asking steadily," he cried. "But is there any use in asking?"

"Plenty. I am not engaged for any yet."

"Well then, I'll ask for the lot, please," he answered gaily.

"H'm! We'll say the third to begin with," she laughed. "After that, we'll see; shall we?"

She didn't wait for a reply, but Desmond's glance as he watched her lithe figure retreating into the night was more than an answer. When, in due course, he discovered her still seated in a secluded corner of the verandah with her original partner, and claimed his dance, she rose with a little cry of welcome.

"Enjoying yourself?" he inquired, with an indulgent smile.

"Immensely. As Mr. Mallory would say, I think it is all perfectly ripping. In fact"—she laughed mischievously—"I think I have been starting my—er—fling!"

"Oh. . . . And do you like it?"

"It is rather nice," she admitted. "Everybody is so kind to me."

"Naturally."

"Even my chaperon is smiling," she added.

"Humph!"

"And I haven't yet forgotten the compliment I received this afternoon. Wouldn't you like me to teach you to flirt—really?"

"Come and dance before I am tempted to teach myself," cried Desmond. "You are a wicked girl!"

"Come along, then! But I think it is good for a girl to be wicked—a *little* wicked—sometimes, don't you?" she asked, laughing.

"Perhaps," he admitted, as they joined the dancers. "But it depends, I think, a good deal upon the man concerned."

To Desmond the dance was ended only too soon. Again he and Cicely found themselves on the verandah. Presently Mallory emerged from the billiard-room, caught sight of Cicely, and turned to retreat. But Cicely joyously summoned him to her.

"It seems to me," she said, "that I am developing, through force of circumstances, into a remarkably bold young woman. I have to deliberately invite my friends to dance with me, or else I am cold-shouldered. Don't you intend to ask me to dance, Mr. Mallory?"

Mallory stood stiffly at his full height, and refused to look down at the dainty figure who glanced upwards expectantly.

"I—er—thought you were too busy with other people," he blurted out.

"I *am* busy—*very* busy," she retorted. "But that doesn't mean that I do not wish to dance with my best friends."

Mallory blushed visibly. He suddenly became suffused with a sense of shame. Cicely seldom had occasion to expend her sweetness for long upon desert air. To remain in the sulks when she put forth her

strength of allurement was a feat beyond the powers of such a one as Mallory. He succumbed without a struggle.

"May I have a two-step then, please?" he asked, humbly.

"You don't deserve *one* step," she replied. "But none of us get what we deserve, so you may have it, and a waltz as well. Now, don't go away and forget them."

Mallory's face brightened with eagerness.

"Forget? Not much," he cried.

"What a desperately long fling it will be between this and twenty-five," said Cicely, irrelevantly, as she watched Mallory depart again to the billiard-room.

"I don't understand," said Desmond.

"Didn't you say that a girl shouldn't marry until she was twenty-five?" she asked. "That means four more years." She sighed audibly. "I don't think I could last so long as that. Just think of flirting for years and years—never being serious—listening always to blatant compliments—occasionally, perhaps, having to hurt somebody."

"I can't imagine it."

"But you advised it, surely?"

"I advised you to enjoy yourself in your own way."

"Quite so! And said that girls should have a fling—and not marry until they were twenty-five—and a lot of other horrid things. I don't believe you understand me one little bit."

"I am beginning to think that I don't," he murmured. "Does any man ever understand a woman?"

"I don't know. I can only answer for this woman. Several men don't understand her," she sighed.

"Oh! I wonder if she understands herself?"

"In certain things that matter she quite understands herself," she replied, slowly.

"H'm! I think that if you will but trust to your own honest intuition at all times, and act accordingly, you need no chaperon or advice either."

"I agree with you. I am doing it," she asserted.

Mallory's beaming countenance suddenly appeared round a corner.

"My dance!" he cried.

Desmond rose, and, deliberately lighting a cigarette, wandered into the compound. The night was very still. Except for the officers' mess, all the camp was asleep. The girl's words had filled him with a strange wonder, a new born thrill, which, although, as he argued, founded upon nothing, yet threatened to engulf him in a wave of hope which he dare not foster. For the hundredth time he dubbed himself a fool. That he loved her with all his soul there could be no question. To think for one instant, however, that her frank camaraderie could mean love in return was madness. To persecute her with protestations like Mallory could not but spoil everything.

The end of the dance found him still alone with his thoughts. The strains of the National Anthem drew him again to the mess-room. He found Barry and Mallory already engaged upon a supper of grilled bones and Munich beer, in which Margaret and Cicely were laughingly declining to share.

Gordon, preaching an early departure for the morrow, gathered his flock together and hustled them down the hill. That very evening must see them back at the estate. To Badula was about twenty-five miles, where they could lunch, and from there, through Nuwera Eliya, to the estate was about another forty.

It was late that morning when they eventually did get under way. Nearly every officer in the little garrison was at the Rest House to see them start. As he listened to the cheery farewells and promised reunions, Mallory seemed to see his prospects of dances with Cicely during the February week at Nuwera Eliya diminishing to vanishing point.

The run down the hill to Badula was soon accomplished, and tiffin hurried through. The road beyond rose again some four thousand feet, so that their further progress was slow. It was within half-an-hour of dusk before the view of the Nuwera Eliya lake rose up before them. They were again in the land of limitless tea. The great hill of Hakgala, closely resembling in certain aspects its more celebrated prototype in Edinburgh—*Arthur's Seat*—loomed up against the skyline behind them.

Gordon steered the car along the road encircling the lake, and, without entering the so-called town of Nuwera Eliya, turned sharply to the left and descended the same Nanuoya road that they had ascended on starting forth upon their journey.

It was quite dark by the time they reached Gordon's factory. The night was very cold, and myriads of stars twinkled frostily in the heavens. Gordon predicted ice that night, and, as events proved, his prophecy was correct.

A sense of home-coming permeated the atmosphere. At the sound of the motor-syren, half-a-dozen coolies, headed by the tea-maker, ran out to welcome their lord and master. The lights of the bungalow, high up above their heads amidst its setting of tea, threw out a radiance of welcome which looked unusually inviting and restful.

Cicely descended from the car with the cheerfulness of one who has at last come into her own.

"Now, Uncle Gerald," she cried, "I intend at last to seriously enter into my duties as your niece and chatelaine. Until you can produce a wife to oust me, I warn you that I propose to be a stern and thrifty housekeeper, and show you how things must be done. So I warn you all that those who love me had better show it—that is, if they wish any special favours."

The coolies seized upon the boxes and started off up the winding path. The house servants, salaaming profoundly, were openly delighted at the return of their master. A large log fire crackled merrily in the drawing-room. England, which a few hours before had been so many miles away, seemed here close at hand. Cicely joyfully ran to the fire and warmed her hands. Then, rushing to the piano, she broke into a wild orgie of melodious chords.

The panther and bear skins had arrived before them. They were at once dragged in for inspection. Cicely viewed her panther with reminiscent thoughts of the episode of the jungle which in her present surroundings seemed hardly credible. Gordon, in mock heroics, laid his bear-skin at Margaret's feet, whilst Mallory, without a word, deposited his before the fireplace in the drawing-room.

The dinner that night was a cosy meal. Gordon, as host, was at his best. Within Margaret's grey eyes rested an air of content which, had he not been so occupied with his own affairs, would have been observed by her brother with delight. Cicely, possessed by an air of charming hospitality towards her uncle's guests, allowed nobody to be dull. It was a pleasant world, with many nice people in it!

CHAPTER XXVIII

For several days following upon their return to the estate the time was passed practically in idleness. Walks amongst the tea in the mornings, and a little tennis in the afternoons filled the lazy hours. Gordon was busily picking up arrears of work. A few neighbours turned up now and then for breakfast or tea. Cicely engaged herself in studying the rearing of a brood of young ducks and several fattening turkeys. Mallory smoked innumerable cigarettes. Desmond gave himself up to many pipes and the apparent study of Ruskin's "Seven Lamps of Architecture," which he had found in Gordon's bedroom. Margaret spent a couple of hours a day at the piano.

Despite the lack of serious occupation, everyone seemed to have plenty to interest them in communion with their own souls. The lack of combined movements in this respect at that time was most marked. After breakfast, each seeking his or her own favourite environment, seemed to be quite content to dream away the hours in solitude.

The atmosphere, nevertheless, was charged with mental tension. Cicely appeared to be the only one who gaily performed her self-constituted tasks with mind well ordered and normal. No shadow of doubt or trouble clouded her countenance. Occasionally she would break into soft trills of song, and smile enig-

matically to herself. Whatever her ideas of her surroundings might be, it was quite apparent that she saw about her more of comedy than tragedy. To Mallory she presented an aspect of charming friendliness that even he found it impossible to misinterpret or resist. Her morning's work finished, she would occasionally seek out Desmond, tell him that he had smoked enough, and lead him to talk of himself, of his past, and his future.

In this fashion the days slipped on into weeks. Christmas week came and went amidst a host of minor local festivities. Dinners and tennis parties were exchanged with various neighbours within a radius of ten miles or more. A day's shopping at Nuwera Eliya afforded an excuse for a gay luncheon party at the hotel there, but the weather was too wet to make the golf links attractive, and so they decided to return to the estate and save their golf until February.

Shortly after the beginning of the New Year, the local event of the year—the sports—was due to take place at Radella, which place was Gordon's nearest social centre. The little club-house, situated in a beautiful level clearing of grass land surrounded by precipitous hills of tea and timber, was on that festive occasion to be the rendezvous of all the planting world for miles around.

A small race track surrounded the club ground, and within that enclosure usually took place the local football, cricket, and hockey matches of the year. A small golf course was also provided with a home within this enclosed area. The club-house itself, a wooden structure containing a billiard table, a common room where dancing, or luncheon, or any other functions could be held, also a bar, looked down upon

the grounds from such a commanding position that a grand stand for races or sports was unnecessary.

The great day arrived at last, and with it glorious sunshine. Gordon's party found themselves upon the course bright and early.

It was to be an all-day affair. From far and near, upon ponies, in motors, on bicycles, and in traps came planters, their wives, their sons and daughters, and their numerous guests. When all was said and done, however, the whole vast assembly numbered less than a hundred people. But scarcity of numbers failed signally to affect the gaiety of those who came. Scattered inhabitants, who see each other but seldom, and who have to travel many miles even for short visits, have no time for anything but cheery greetings when they do arrive.

Gordon was surprised at the large size of the "meet," as, in Ceylon parlance, he called it. His guests had expected six times as many people, but when he had explained that there were only about six thousand Europeans in the island altogether, and that those were not all planters, they began to view things with a sense of proportion which had escaped them before.

Gordon's estate was comparatively close, so that he and his guests were amongst the first to arrive. Several long tables in the main room of the club-house were already being laid with breakfast by the various neighbouring bungalow servants , and every moment brought upon the scene a couple of fresh servant arrivals, who, with boxes of food balanced upon their heads, emerged from tea paths in every direction.

Hams and turkeys, great haunches of mutton and rounds of beef, meat pies and game pies, savouries and salads, and cakes, and, in fact, everything that the ingenuity of the cooks could originate, flooded the tables. No trouble appeared to be too great for the Tamil and Cingalese "boys," who flitted hither and thither in a competition to show up their respective bungalows in a good light. No effort of the hosts to entertain their guests seemed to have been forgotten or neglected.

Bachelor planters, mostly in blazers and ties of well-known English public schools or colleges, thronged the little bar premises. A few introductions from Gordon, and Desmond and Mallory were resisting with difficulty the hospitable attentions of their hosts, whose demands comprised a consumption of alcohol before breakfast which would have had disastrous effects, if yielded to.

The good-fellowship, the open-handed hospitality, and the spontaneous geniality of everybody there was very contagious. Everybody knew everybody else, and apparently liked them. At all events, if they didn't, they forbore to show it. The natural beauty of the situation of the ground, the novelty of the surroundings, and, in fact, the whole environment of scene and society afforded a fascination which to the uninitiated proved far greater than they had expected.

The long jump, kicking the football, and a hurdle race occurring in rapid succession, were quite sufficient to throw Mallory into a perfect fever of sporting reminiscences with a bevy of new acquaintances. Desmond soon found himself immersed in a game of pool which lasted until breakfast time. The girls were

surrounded by a host of young gallants competing for a share of their society.

Everybody was ready for breakfast by noon. Ceremony was cast to the winds. When all was declared to be ready, the various groups of friends sat down where they could find places. Presently corks began to fly, and any hidden gloom of life that there may have been precipitantly disappeared into oblivion.

The Police band from Colombo, which had been brought up by train for this one day only, now appeared upon the scene, and got to work at once. Mallory had long before this decided within his heart that a planters' "meet" was not to be despised. Cicely's eyes were beaming with joyous acceptance of all the good things of life that momentarily presented themselves. Margaret, in her own quiet way, was enjoying every minute of an experience that was as novel as it was entertaining.

After breakfast the sports were continued. Every conceivable variety of event seemed to be on the programme, and there were candidates for each. It was quite dark by the time the last race (for those who had failed to win a prize) was run. The band had played steadily since noon, but, nothing daunted, now expressed themselves ready to continue until further notice.

Afternoon tea had followed the breakfast, and the remains of this being now cleared away, and the room laid bare, a goodly proportion of the gathering was clamouring for dancing. In the little billiard room arose a babel of voices from a ribald crowd of pool players; a couple of keen rubbers of bridge engrossed the attentions of another room; the bar hummed with hilarious anecdote.

Margaret and Cicely were engaged for dancing, three deep, in almost as many minutes. Mallory started off with Cicely, and Gordon stated that, as a host, it was his duty to dance the first dance with Margaret. Desmond, capturing Cicely for the second dance, continued, unheeding of time, well on into the fourth before she was taken from him.

It was nine o'clock before the exhausted band were allowed to desist, and the ladies could be induced to depart. As one of the nearest neighbours, Gordon had invited a large party to dinner.

The night was very dark. Coolies, with lanterns, awaited to escort their masters by the winding foot-paths, leading hillwards, into the denser shadows; the boxes of the guests, with their changes of clothes, upon coolies' heads, had already preceded their owners.

Half a dozen men and a couple of ladies comprised the extra guests. It was late before they were ready to assemble in the drawing-room, but their appetites were all the better for the delay.

The meal proved to be a merry continuation of the flirtations and laughter of the earlier part of the day. After dinner, their thirst for excitement was not yet assuaged. Despite all protests from several of the more lazy ones, the drawing-room was cleared of most of its furniture, and a boisterous game of blind-man's-buff ensued.

More drinks and sandwiches in the early hours of the morning ended the day. The guests, disposed in various odds and ends of rooms and beds as could be best arranged, were at length induced to retire to rest. It had been a joyous occasion, and Gordon's party

admitted next day that they wouldn't have missed it for much.

With many promises to meet shortly at Nuwera Eliya during the race week, the guests departed next morning after breakfast, and again the peaceful life of the estate resumed its sway.

CHAPTER XXIX

"I'M going fishing," announced Cicely at tea-time. "Where's your rod, Uncle Gerald?"

"It is all ready in the gun room. If you go to the lower stream half a mile below the factory, I expect you'll get a trout or two," replied Gordon. "Some of us will go and fetch you before dark, and help carry home the spoil."

"I'll go with you now," stated Mallory.

"No, thank you," answered Cicely, quietly. "I think I would rather be alone for awhile. You are sure to talk, and you'll frighten the fish. Besides, you'll distract my attention, and I shall need it all for the fish."

"I'll promise not to speak one word," pleaded Mallory.

Cicely laughed indifferently.

"Oh, well, if you can find amusement by sitting on the bank and not speaking one single word, you are quite welcome to come," she replied.

"I'll get the rod and net," he cried, jumping up with alacrity.

The next minute found Cicely leading the way down the footpath. A few down-like clouds drifted lazily across the sky. There was a melodious chirruping of birds amidst the branches of the gum trees. Green lizards shot across the path in the sunlight. Cicely

halted suddenly as she met a couple of shiny black millipedes slowly working their way over the clay. A line of female pluckers, returning from one of the fields above the bungalow with full baskets upon their backs passed, chattering, through the tea. The screech of the wire shoot as a sack of leaf shot downwards to the factory echoed through the valley.

"Well," inquired Cicely, presently, "did you find her yesterday by any chance?"

"Find who?" asked Mallory, in surprise.

"That nice girl that you are to confide in me about," she replied, glancing back over her shoulder, "I saw several quite pretty girls that you were dancing with. What about Miss Romilly?"

"Pouf!" he exclaimed, disdainfully "She seems a decent sort of girl, but you surely don't imagine you are going to palm me off on her, do you?"

"You needn't be so supercilious," cried Cicely. "In any case, there were other ones. Now, I thought the girl with the nice blue eyes and the fair hair a charming-looking girl. You seemed to like her, too."

"Don't like fair hair," he grumbled, "black is my favourite colour."

"Oh, well, let me see. There was that girl who was sitting beside you at tea. She looked awfully sweet."

"Humph!"

Cicely's eyes danced with amusement, but her back was towards Mallory, and with bent head she picked her footsteps down the path.

"I think," she continued, unheedingly, "that you are frightfully difficult to please. But perhaps, after all, it is better to be like that. It is safer. I wish I

were a young man, about twenty-five, travelling round the world. I would pick up all sorts of nice girl friends wherever I went. Nobody would expect me to be serious in my attentions, and so I would flirt with heaps and heaps of pretty girls." She sighed profoundly. "But then, unfortunately, I am not a man."

Mallory grunted, but said nothing.

"I know so much about girls, though, that I can give you lots of tips for your guidance if you would like to learn, Mr. Mallory," she continued. "All my knowledge is wasted upon myself. Besides, a girl mustn't flirt. It is different with a man; isn't it?"

Again Mallory grunted.

"Isn't it?" insisted Cicely.

"No!" he ejaculated, briskly.

"Oh, dear," she sighed, "I thought I was being nice to you, and you do nothing but grunt. Is it because I told you you were not to talk that you are so silent, or has the devil really turned a monk?" She laughed merrily. "You certainly used to flirt—quite recently, too."

"I didn't flirt with you. I told you that before, and you know it is true," he cried, hotly.

"Yes, of course," she replied. "Friends don't flirt. They know each other too well. I am referring to all the others before me. I think you were quite right, you see. In fact, I am advising a further course of it, and, as I told you before, I am longing for confidences. I wish it was right for girls to flirt in the same way as men may. It must be a most diverting pastime. Haven't you found it so?"

"Oh," groaned Mallory, "I don't know. I am not interested in flirting one little bit." He laughed

mirthlessly. "And in any case, I don't think that you need any information on the subject."

"Oh! Now I wonder what you mean by that?" she inquired. "You don't surely mean to insinuate—"

They had reached the bank of the little torrent which, tumbling tortuously around a spur of the hillside, ran here into several placid pools and reaches. Mallory began to piece together the light rod. A shady tree hung over the brook, its great roots forming seats, upon one of which Cicely deposited herself until the cast should be adjusted to the line. Mallory's glance was intent upon his work. Cicely's blue eyes, demurely cast upwards, watched him for a moment in silence. Then she began to idly draw a pattern in the sand with a twig. Still he didn't speak.

"Well?" she demanded at last.

Mallory's lips moved as if to speak, but no words came. Then his eyes lifted and enveloped her stooping figure in a swift glance, which, had she seen it, would have warned her of possible trouble.

"I mean to insinuate," he said, quietly, "nothing more than that you may flirt, or do anything else you please, without altering my opinion of you. Through it all you are the sweetest girl I have ever met, and as long as you are near me I haven't got the heart to flirt with the prettiest other girl on earth."

"Oh!" cried Cicely, springing hastily to her feet. "I must claim your promise not to talk. You had better smoke. Give me the rod, please."

Without protest, Mallory did as he was told. Depositing himself between the two giant tree-roots, he meditatively filled his pipe.

Cicely, with a heightened colour, took up an

advantageous stand and cast adroitly across the deep brown pool. Keeping her back religiously towards Mallory, she whipped the pool in silence. For all she showed of a knowledge of his presence, he might as well have been a thousand miles away.

For half-an-hour, or more, not a sign of a rise of a fish rewarded her patient manipulations. Then, suddenly, there was a rush through the dark water and her line spun out at lightning speed.

Mallory was alive in a second. With landing-net in hand, he sprang from rock to rock, down-stream, shouting advice. The mental tension of a moment before had snapped in an instant. Mallory's sporting instincts rose triumphantly over every other consideration.

It proved to be an exciting contest. The trout was full of game, and Cicely refused all help. Eventually, however, after Mallory had slipped several times into the water off his various rocky perches, the fish fell into the landing-net.

Cicely breathed a deep sigh of contented relief, and threw herself down upon the bank to rest.

The next moment the sound of Margaret's voice from the path high up above their heads reached them, and she and Gordon appeared upon the bank of the stream. The sun had disappeared well below the tree-tops. The air was momentarily growing cooler. From the bungalow chimneys arose the smoke of newly-lit evening fires. The hour of ante-prandial gin and bitters, as Mallory mentioned, had arrived. Also, as Gordon reminded them, if they returned at once, there was still time to have Cicely's capture cooked for dinner.

"Where's Mr. Cleeve?" asked Cicely.

"Smoking in the garden, the lazy fellow!" replied Margaret.

"I don't think he deserves any of my fish for his dinner," cried Cicely. "I'll go and tell him so. Will you bring the rod and things, please, Mr. Mallory?"

As she spoke, she ran lightly up the hill, with Mallory in full pursuit. Margaret and Gordon followed more leisurely. Margaret watched the girl's retreating figure, smiling.

"Your niece, I think, is one of the most charming girls I have ever known," she remarked to Gordon. "And there is no doubt that Mr. Mallory thinks quite as much of her as I do."

"Ah! Do you think she also likes him—more than is good for her?" asked Gordon, anxiously. "He is a good lad, but—"

Margaret paused before she answered. Her eyes grew introspective. Again she glanced upwards at Cicely's graceful figure silhouetted against the crimson sky.

"Of course, I cannot say for certain," she replied, slowly. "Cicely has not confided in me. But I should imagine that she can quite well take care of herself as regards Mr. Mallory, and that she has no intention of falling in love with him."

"You think then that I ought not to interfere?" he asked.

"No, I see no necessity for your avuncular intervention at present," replied Margaret, smiling. "That is—certainly as regards Mr. Mallory."

"Good! I am rather relieved. Women know so much more of these sort of things than men, that I am very glad to hear you say that. I am still rather troubled, though. I gave Mr. Mallory an open

invitation to stay on here as long as he cared to, purely because he seemed so keen about it—and, besides, I like him. I do not want him, however, to possibly imagine that I wish to bring him and Cicely together. There is nothing further from my thoughts."

"I quite understand," replied Margaret, glancing up at his honest sunburnt face. "I'll help you if I see any necessity, if you like."

"Thank you, I would like it immensely. There is nobody whose judgment and help I value so much," he replied.

In silence they ascended the last few yards of the path and entered the bungalow. Whatever ideas of a misanthropic life in solitude Desmond may have had, there was no doubt regarding their present annihilation. The soft notes of a serenade arose from the piano. Cicely was playing, and at her side sat Desmond watching her. Now and again she caught his glance and dropped a word or two. Margaret looked in at the door for a second, and then, turning aside, invited Gordon to accompany her to see the poppies in the garden closing their lids for the night.

CHAPTER XXX

To those whose greatest excitement for many months has been no more than a small district tennis "Meet," or a dance that a dozen people can provide, a comparatively large gathering such as the Nuwera Eliya week produces is an event of epoch-making importance. From almost every planting district in the little island, and also from the government and commercial circles of Colombo appear competitors for the tennis tournament, and owners of race-horses for the three days' race meeting.

The little settlement, with its few hotels and scattered bungalows, which is during the preceding few months almost deserted, wakes up about the beginning of February into a state of activity previously unbelievable. The season begins on that date, and heated Colombo disgorges its pale and pasty-complexioned ladies and children "up the hill," where, until the torrential rains break in June, they remain. Every bungalow is filled to overflowing. The hotels also, apart from local residents, are replete with European and American tourists *en route* to and from the Far East. Burma, Singapore, and India add their quota of jaded refugees from the heat of the torrid plains. The sun shines continuously. Fires within and frost without enliven the nights. The Hill Club, filled with its holiday crowd of

bachelors and grass widowers, resounds to the "scream of joy" that permeates the atmosphere to the exclusion of all things serious. The United Club, usually the place of gloom, *par excellence*, for half the year, awakes from slumber. The little race-stand receives a new coat of paint. The Turf Club, the United Club, the Bachelors, and the hotels compete for first place in retaining the services of the Regimental and Police bands for their respective balls. In fact, Colombo, with its accustomed energy in search of pleasure, has brought its talents with it.

Gordon had reserved rooms at one of the largest hotels a couple of months before Christmas. Amongst other attractions for that particular year the bachelors had advertised that their ball was to be a fancy-dress one. Margaret and Cicely, ever since they had been warned of this coming event, had been busily engaged in secret arrangements. As the car couldn't hold half the luggage they deemed it necessary to take with them, the usual coolies, to whom a dozen miles' run with boxes upon their heads was an every-day event, were despatched ahead with it.

The opening chorus of the week took the shape of tennis. The earth courts at the Hill Club were as level as weeks of coolie labour could make them. From eight o'clock in the morning until dark the events followed each other in unremitting succession. The great day, when the finals of the Ceylon tennis championships were to be played, would not be until the end of the week, but those of lesser light than the champions had all their little coteries of followers who were interested in their efforts.

Near by, the Club Chalêt, a small building set apart for luncheons and the use of ladies, was from

an early hour alive with the spirit of conviviality. There were plenty of onlookers at the games, and no lack of enthusiastic applause and comment. Even gangs of estate coolies would sometimes obtain leave to walk twenty miles to see their master play.

Not a cloud obscured the wooded heights of Pedro, rising two thousand feet above the valley. The club gardens, a gorgeous mass of variegated blooms, were at their best. Roses and violets, geraniums and cosmos, and everywhere clumps of arum lilies filled the air with intoxicating perfume. A wonderful bottle-brush tree, its dark red brush-like blossoms waving gently in the light breeze, occupied the centre of the garden landscape. A hundred feet below, the narrow stream wound tortuously through the green valley where lay the golf links. Great clumps of gorse, a perfect mass of yellow blossoms, dotted the course. In the near distance, a couple of red-roofed bungalows relieved any suspicion of monotony in the landscape. Behind, rising almost perpendicularly heavenwards, were the densely-wooded hills of uncleared jungle. A quarter of a mile to the left stood the white stone house of the General Officer Commanding Ceylon, with the Union Jack fluttering before it.

Mallory had been tempted to enter for the open singles, but, after his experience of earth-courts at Jaffna, his ambitions had, on mature consideration, died a natural death. He had plenty to do, however, amongst his planter acquaintances in the club. Barry and several other officers had arrived from Diyatalawa Camp, and not a few genial planters claimed acquaintanceship.

Cicely and Margaret were quite content to sit and

watch the ever-varying other onlookers, who came and went all day.

After tiffin, to which Gordon had taken them in the Chalet, they almost ran into the arms of Martin, who, with beaming face, said that he had been hunting for them everywhere. The ball of the next night was, he said, to be the special feature of the week, and he excitedly began to make plans of amusement with Cicely. The latter's promise to dance with him had not been forgotten, and he claimed a supper dance as well; but this she declined to promise. He was cheerier, if possible, than ever, and evidently intended to have the time of his life.

When the evening shadows fell, and the wonderful crimsons and violets above Pedro had faded into purple, Martin insisted upon leading the whole party to the United Club.

The latter's promise that the building would be full was no exaggeration. On the right of the entrance a babel of voices arose from an over-filled bridge-room, where mixed couples were keenly competing. There was a sort of drawing-room, where, around little tables, sat groups of ladies and their men friends discussing the events of the day, with the assistance of variously-coloured short drinks. Beyond this room lay a broad verandah, equally patronised by those whose appetites for conversation or flirting would not be assuaged until the dinner-hour arrived.

From a room upstairs there suddenly arose the sound of a piano.

"Hullo," cried Martin, "they're dancing now. Do come, Miss Rosmead."

"Me, too?" begged Mallory.

"Oh, you can dance at any time," intervened

Gordon, linking his arm in that of Mallory. "Come and drink in the bar. I'll introduce you to a new concoction, yclept 'milk punch.' A few glasses will make your hair curl."

Mallory reluctantly consenting, Cicely and Martin joined about twenty couples who were already in the middle of a waltz. At one end of the room was a stage for theatricals. The floor was good, and everybody seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the chance of a dance, which, as a rule, came their way only too seldom.

Margaret and Desmond stood in the doorway watching the scene with interest. The former rather preferred not to dance before dinner, but Martin's importunities prevailed. When Mallory and Gordon returned, Desmond had taken Martin's place with Cicely, and although Mallory tried to secure a dance, these two followed on with the next waltz unheedingly.

It was quite late when they reached the hotel, the entrance-hall of which was crowded with a gay throng of people already dressed for dinner. Half-an-hour later Cicely, wearing the pretty green satin frock in which she had appeared at the Galle Face dance at Colombo, hurried downstairs. Gordon had invited Martin and Barry to join their party.

The dining-room was crowded. An atmosphere of exhilaration, in anticipation of coming joys, pervaded the conversation. Cicely, with flushed cheeks and dancing eyes, was in the highest spirits. Martin shot furtive glances of admiration across the table; Mallory was openly complimentary.

Gordon and Margaret, in amused understanding of Cicely and her admirers, at that moment were quietly

content with life as they found it. Desmond, also, who seemed wonderfully free from care, was in his cheeriest mood.

There was no function on the cards for that evening, so they took the opportunity of getting to bed early.

The next morning, before the sun had been up half-an-hour, Cicely, with Gordon and Desmond, was on the race-course. It was the hour for the morning exercise of the horses. Gordon knew several owners intimately, and, as this was the first day of the races, was interested to see for himself how his friends' animals shaped.

There were several other ladies present, and the usual handful of owners and trainers. Cicely was intensely fond of horses, and was delighted at the chance of seeing them exercise. The air was very cold, and the riders' fingers were blue as they sprang from the saddle and repaired to the weighing-in room, where coffee and rolls were ready for those who cared to have them.

A sight of the beautiful yellow gorse, wet with hoar frost, the sleek, highly-trained animals galloping through the exhilarating atmosphere, and the general *bien être* of a perfect morning, were well worth the extra effort of early rising.

Margaret warned Cicely that she had a long day before her, and preached caution as regarded her strength, but the latter only laughed derision, and promised to give Mallory a beating at golf after breakfast. They ended, however, in a compromise, whereby Martin and Cicely played Mallory and Margaret.

The links were in perfect condition. Martin played

a better game than Mallory, and Cicely, animated by the spirit of competition, played a long way above her form. At the twelfth hole Margaret declared their side beaten, and insisted upon joining Gordon and Desmond at lunch at the Chalet.

That afternoon, the first day of the races, was a distinct success. With the knowledge gained from their early morning visit to the course, and the acceptance of a few judicious tips from Gordon's friends, Mallory and Martin won quite a modest competence from the *totalizator*. A couple of professional bookmakers were in the enclosure, but these, compared with their brethren in England, gave such poor odds that the betting machines were much more profitable.

Cicely, escorted by a bevy of squires, headed by Martin and Barry, wandered about amongst the well-dressed throng of people, delighted with everything. It was a glorious day of sunshine; everybody was so nice to her; and it was all so novel.

More than one pair of eyes glanced again and again at the girl, whose youthful grace of figure, dainty English colouring, and winning manner, were so delightfully refreshing to see. She was dressed entirely in grey—a frock of soft crêpe de chine, with shoes and stockings to match, and beneath the broad brim of a grey hat her deep blue eyes looked forth upon a world all *couleur de rose*.

A planters' entertainment club, called the "Horn Club," was, at tea-time, "At Home" in a tent beside the stand. Desmond, who had left Cicely to her own devices most of the day, emerged from the paddock after the fourth race and invited her to have tea with him. Margaret and Gordon were already within the

tent, beckoning to the others. Mallory grumbled openly at losing Cicely, but the girl laughed lightly, and accepted Desmond's invitation.

"What are you going to wear at the ball to-night?" asked Desmond.

"I don't think I shall tell you," she answered. "I think I would rather leave you in the dark until you can tell me if you like it. I think it very pretty. Margaret made it for me."

"I can promise you I shall like it," he rejoined. "I think I would like you in anything."

"Oh! That sounds like a flirty remark," she said naïvely. "Is it?"

"No, not flirty, as you call it—*true*."

Cicely suddenly met his eyes, and a suspicion of a blush mounted to her cheeks.

"Thank you," she said, demurely.

"I wonder," murmured Desmond, diffidently, "if you could be induced to let me take you in to supper to-night? There will be many competitors."

"Don't you intend to dance?" she asked.

"Yes."

The girl toyed with her bread and butter, helped herself absent-mindedly to a piece of cake, and then broke into a little laugh.

"Shall we say supper and three waltzes then?" she asked.

"Do you mean it? Do you really mean that you can spare me so much?"

"Only on condition, of course, that you really want them. Are you sure you do?"

Desmond carefully selected a cigarette. His face expressed decided incredulity. There seemed no great cause for wonder, and yet to himself he would

not admit that Cicely could possibly wish what she offered him.

"Well?" she queried. "Truly the way of a man with a maid is, as King Solomon asserted, one of the chief wonders of the world."

Desmond's thoughts recalled the same remark as made on board the "Soudan," and smiled.

"If you mean that the proverbial stupidity of my sex concerning the affairs of maids is at present particularly applicable to me, I fear I have no defence," he said. "I wish to dance with you, to sit out with you, to have supper with you, for as long as ever you can bear with me—that you know without the telling—but I must not monopolise you to the exclusion of—well, those, whose society——"

He broke off weakly and lit his cigarette.

"Yes? Whose society—? Go on!" she urged.

"Well—whose society you like. There are so many men here to-day."

Cicely searched his face in genuine wonder.

"Do you really mean that?" she asked.

They had both been so absorbed in their own affairs that they had completely forgotten their surroundings. A race had been run since they had entered the tent, and now the place again became crowded with people scurrying in for tea. A stentorian voice at their elbow awoke them to the present. Cicely looked up suddenly, and there stood Mr. Barry.

"Oh, here you are—at last!" cried the latter. "I have been hunting for you everywhere, Miss Rosmead. It wasn't fair to run away and hide like this. Everybody is already booking dances for to-night. I hope you have kept some for me. We are having a perfectly glorious time, aren't we?" Twist-

ing an infinitesimal moustache with satisfaction, he sat himself upon a chair and beamed at Cicely expectantly. "There really isn't any place like Ceylon, Miss Rosmead, is there? I am having the time of my life. Do you know that when I first danced with you, I had to admit that, at last, I had met someone who could dance better than myself. How many may I have?"

Desmond's clean-shaven lips twitched with amusement. He was by no means devoid of humour, and this gushing exuberance of spirits and complacency was most diverting. He smiled across at Cicely, and, slowly rising to his feet, turned towards the door.

"Must we go, Mr. Cleeve?" she asked, calling to him. "I'm coming. Thank you, Mr. Barry. Shall we say the third extra? I think I can spare that."

"Oh, but I say, Miss Rosmead! Only one, and that an extra! You really can't mean it."

"*Au revoir*, then," cried Cicely, hurrying across the tent and unheeding his protests. "We'll meet this evening." Joining Desmond, who was leaning against a tent post, she glanced over her shoulder, adding, "But, by the way, how shall I know you? What is your costume to be, Mr. Barry?"

"Romeo," he whispered. "I got the kit from England."

"Oh, how delightfully appropriate!" she called. "You will look perfectly splendid, I am sure. Bye, bye."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE United Club had been decorated and garnished out of all recognition. The bachelors, rosetted and smiling, flitted hither and thither, upstairs and downstairs, welcoming their guests and arranging final details. By nine o'clock the place was crowded with a seething, merry mass of wondrously-costumed men and women of every age in history and romance. The big room upstairs had been reserved for the dancing, and in the sitting-room was arranged the supper. The back verandah, fitted up into secluded corners and *kala jugas*, was looking, beneath the silvery light of a full moon, a most tempting location for those seeking ideality between dances.

When Gordon's motor pulled up at the entrance, the stairway and passages were already crowded with early arrivals. Gordon, consigning the girls to the ladies' dressing-room, was at once seized upon by one of the hosts, who was doling out programmes. Judging by the flow of witticisms and apt remarks which flowed volubly from this latter gentleman's lips, he was a well-known character. He was dressed in a green coat and trousers covered with various designs of billiard and pool balls. A cascade of coloured balls, emanating from an imitation pool bottle, covered his back; a green lamp-shade formed his hat; net pockets hung from his shoulders and hips; a scoring board crossed his chest; cues in cloth formed side stripes to his trousers.

"Hullo, Joe," cried Martin, "that's a saucy kit!"

"Rather *chic*, I call it," cried the former. "What do you call yourself? You look a most unmitigated ruffian."

With bronzed face surmounted by an enormous turban, and wearing a little embroidered jacket and loose white baggy Indian trousers, Martin certainly deserved the criticism.

"I'm a *Pathan*," he replied. "Have you seen Gerald Gordon anywhere?"

"Yes, there he is, over there. He and his two English pals are dressed alike—pierrots."

"Good evening, Mr. Martin," said somebody, behind him. "If you hadn't given me a hint beforehand I certainly shouldn't have known you. You look splendidly fierce."

"Hullo, Miss Cleeve," he cried, turning round. "Is that really you? What a very beautiful dress! A watteau shepherdess, isn't it? How different you look with powdered hair. It is—er—stunning."

Slowly the long queue of dancers was climbing the broad stairway. Margaret and Martin were pushed along with the others. The band had already begun to play the waltz of "A Thousand Kisses."

"By Jove! There's that ripping waltz again! I haven't heard it since Colombo. Have you seen Miss Rosmead, anybody?" cried an unmistakable voice at the bottom of the stairway.

"Hullo, Barry," replied Gordon. "You do look a corker! Do look at his legs, everybody! Tights, by Jove! And look at his pretty doublet and the jaunty cap upon his auburn curls!"

"Who the deuce *are* you, anyway?" grunted Mallory.

"I'm Romeo, of course," bellowed Barry. "It is a jolly good kit. You fellows are all jealous. Where's Juliet? I mean Miss Rosmead?"

Mallory's eyes flashed ominously.

"I think you had better run outside and cool your head, my boy," he said, fiercely.

At that moment Barry's gaze suddenly rested upon the figure of a pretty girl dressed in what was obviously meant to be a personification of the Nuwera Eliya golf links. A semi-circular, green, sort of tiara, from which little sprigs of gorse protruded, surmounted her abundant brown hair. A border of minute cloth golf clubs encircled a green skirt. Upon the latter, and also upon the green bodice, were discovered lighter green patches of velvet, representing golf greens. A river of grey satin ran across her back beneath painted bridges. The girl possessed a peculiarly bright, cheery face, with delightful brown eyes, and, as she sauntered across the passage, there was a noticeable graceful swing in her walk that attracted Mallory's comprehensive scrutiny at first sight.

Barry at once elbowed his way through the throng in the new arrival's direction, but Martin was before him. In another moment the latter had carried her off and had entered the ball-room.

Desmond had been keeping his eye upon the ladies' room. Presently, Cicely, a dainty vision in the dress of a *punchinello*, hurried, laughing, towards him.

"I hope you haven't waited very long?" she cried. "I couldn't get this wretched cap right. This is only an extra, I think. Ours is the first proper dance, isn't it?"

As she spoke, she patted a little pointed cap of

cornflower blue velvet, decorated with a couple of small bells, which sat saucily upon her masses of black hair.

Desmond noted her heightened colour, her slightly parted lips, her dancing eyes, and thought that he had never in his life seen any costume so bewitching. She wore a short voluminous skirt of many broad stripes of white and cornflower blue, silk stockings and shoes of the same shade of blue, and a soft white satin bodice beribboned and slashed with the same blue which matched the blue depths of her eyes.

"Do you like me?" she whispered, naïvely. "I hope you do, because Meg designed this for me. I think it very pretty."

His eyes beamed admiration.

"Yes, I like it."

"M—mm—you're not very enthusiastic!" she said, with a pout.

"Perhaps I shall be able to express myself better later on—when—I—er—have got used to it. If you still wish to dance, shall we begin?"

The next moment found them in the midst of the dancers. Cicely caught the eyes of Barry signalling frantically, but smilingly shook her head. A few minutes later she saw him consoling himself with a plump girl in blue, who was dimpling prettily at his admiring comments. Martin and his friend in the golf costume were merrily greeting their many acquaintances as they steered their way down the room. The native infantry band was playing better even than usual. Things were beginning to hum with all the *verve* of assured success.

Cicely was enjoying herself immensely. Her pro-

gramme was quite full. Everybody was charmingly friendly and appreciative. Mallory had secured the second dance. Martin had gone off to reserve a large table for a supper which he intended should be the feature of the evening.

Downstairs in the bar, where the non-dancing men had gathered together in force, Desmond was quietly smoking. On the verandah Gordon and Margaret sat alone amidst the shadows. Presently the band ceased, and the heated dancers flocked into the crisp air. A pierrot and a butterfly, a sailor and a vivandiere, a yeoman of the guard and a Swiss maiden hurried in quick succession to find comfortable corners. Three naval officers, who had arrived upon the scene too late to secure dances, were importuning Cicely upon the stairs.

Supper came at last. Gordon's party, with Martin and his pretty friend in the golf dress, to whom also Barry and the girl with the dimple attached themselves, occupied their reserved table. It was a cheery, joyous supper. The planting element had come to enjoy themselves, and they were doing it.

"Cheer oh, Joe!" cried Martin, as his friend in the billiard dress passed by. "Give you fifty in a hundred, and play you for a dib!"

"Ho, indeed!" exclaimed the other, breaking into a most realistic imitation of a duck quacking. "Who's afraid?"

Suddenly above the din arose the dreamy strains of one of Strauss's waltzes. Desmond caught Cicely's glance, and together they rose from the table.

"Shall we sit it out?" she asked. "Or would you rather dance?"

"Let us go on to the verandah and see the moon-

light upon the lake," he replied. "Do you remember the night we sat waiting for the panther?"

"Every moment of it," she whispered. "Here's a nice place sheltered by this screen. Let us sit here, shall we?"

The sky was clear of any cloud, and out in the open upon the race-course, and beyond where the waters of the lake shimmered in the night breeze, the moonlight shed a silver glow almost as light as day. Opposite, against the skyline, frowned the black hills of jungle. Frogs croaked, as usual, in the distance. Cicely recalled the many such night scenes that she had enjoyed since she arrived in Ceylon, and sighed. The thought that they must come to an end had, for the moment, cast its shadow upon her.

"Do you know," said Desmond, presently, "I am not sure that your dress quite suits you to-night. As a rule it would—admirably. It is a costume that at most times would suit your natural vivacity perfectly."

"Oh! But why, then, not to-night?" she questioned in genuine surprise.

Desmond turned towards her, studying her face as he spoke.

"Because," he replied, "you are unusually quiet to-night. Your eyes are so peculiarly free from their ordinary mischievous twinkle that you might easily grace the costume of a Quaker girl." He paused, but the girl answered nothing. "What is troubling you? Can I help? You said, you know, that, as a chaperon, there would still be many troubles in which I should have to help. Tell me—have any of those troubles, which you so laughingly referred to, by any chance come to pass?"

"No . . . Not exactly."

"Has Mallory been troubling again?"

"No."

"Won't you tell me what it is?"

Cicely looked across to the dim outlines of the hills, and for a few moments she was very still.

"I don't think there is anything to tell," she said, at last. "I get a little impatient and even depressed sometimes, but it is nothing really, I think. It will, I believe, all come out one day in the washing. I am sorry if I appear dull." She broke into a gentle chuckle. "I suppose I must laugh and be merry, or doff my cap and bells, without delay. Heigh, oh, merrily we go! Come and dance! I'll dance this waltz with you, and somehow make my peace with its rightful owner afterwards."

The ball-room by this time presented a very festive scene. Supper and champagne had not failed to give any stimulus which may have been wanting at an earlier hour of the evening. A riotous set of lancers was in full swing as Desmond and Cicely entered the room. Mallory was absent in the bar downstairs, but Barry and Martin were both very much *en évidence*, and the latter's friend "Joe" was keeping his own set of lancers in roars of laughter as he bowed and scraped to his partner in imitation of a French dancing master.

Margaret and Gordon were not to be seen, and no one seemed to know anything about them.

By special request, the band broke into a rollicking coon dance. Cicely, throwing sadness to the winds, joined the giddy throng with all her accustomed vivacity. Desmond noted the change, and, man-like, wondered.

It was well on into the early hours of the morning before Gordon appeared from nowhere, and gathered his flock together.

The dance was voted by all to have been a wonderful success. Barry, still complacently happy in his romantic *rôle*, joined them in the car, Martin and he dexterously occupying the luggage rack behind.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE morning broke clear and beautiful, with just that tinge of nippiness of the air that added colour to wan cheeks and a tonic to jaded appetite. It was decided at breakfast that it would be a pity to waste such a heavenly day in idling on the tennis courts, so Gordon suggested a run in the car to see Hakgala gardens.

This scheme was accepted with alacrity. An early tiffin, and a tea-basket in the car with them, was voted to be an excellent idea. The run to the gardens was only half-a-dozen miles. They could saunter about its shady walks until tea-time, and then meet again at the shelter provided for visitors, where they could make their own tea in seclusion.

Mallory elected to stay with the tennis people, and Martin consequently begged for the spare seat in the car.

It was a delightful, easy run down the winding road beyond the head of the lake. On the left of the narrow track there was a sheer drop into a valley, beyond which great hills of patna grass rose precipitously, and straight before them lay the majestic Hakgala hill itself, like a sentinel watching over the plains of Uva. The sapphire sky, the panoramic vastness of hill and plain, and the stillness over all produced an impressive grandeur that silenced speech.

Leaving the car at the gates of the gardens, Gordon

sent Peter with the basket to the tea-house, and started off, with Margaret, down one of the numerous paths which wound through the densely-planted woods.

It was all very beautiful, and the intersecting paths led through ever-changing scenes of wildness, which the hand of man had helped to perfect. Every conceivable wild flower grew by the wayside, and ferns of every local description formed a green fairyland.

Martin, knowing the geography of the place, dropped behind with Cicely, and at her instigation they deserted Gordon and his partner and wandered off into a bye-way.

Desmond, having discovered a comfortable seat, lit his pipe, and deliberately remained where he found himself. He appeared, indeed, to have much to think about. To abstain from telling Cicely that he loved her was momentarily growing more difficult. And yet, was it fair to her—to the others—to declare his feelings towards her? They had, hitherto, been such a happy little party. What if he ruined it all for everybody? There was still the voyage to England to be considered.

Gordon and Margaret, oblivious of their surroundings, slowly disappeared down an incline leading to the densest part of a grove of trees laden with hanging creepers.

It was quite time for tea before Martin could be induced to return with Cicely to the wooden shelter. The latter, erected with one side open, which looked out upon the broad expanse of valley, was in an excellent situation. The view from the little plateau was superbly grand and beautiful. Hills upon hills of yellow patna, numerous paddy fields, a thousand feet down in the hollow, and a glimpse of the red

huts at Diyatalawa camp, twenty miles away, lay spread out below them.

Desmond had found his way there first. When Martin and Cicely emerged from the wood, he was whistling softly while employing himself in unpacking the tea-basket and lighting the spirit kettle for tea. There was as yet no sign of Margaret and Gordon.

The merest suspicion of a cloud hung above Hakgala; otherwise, amidst the clear rarefied atmosphere of the uplands, the outlines of the hills stood out with a wonderful sharpness of definition. All was still—the leaves, the lizards and chameleons, even the gaily-plumaged little birds—all were silent.

Presently the kettle boiled. Cicely, refusing to wait longer for her uncle and Margaret, poured out the tea. Martin expounded the latest news from Jaffna. Desmond, making a remark at intervals, watched the varying expressions upon Cicely's face as Martin rattled on. They finished their tea, and yet the others did not come.

"Come along," cried Cicely at last, "we'll have to organise a search party. I expect it is a case of the babes in the wood again. Perhaps the wicked uncle has at last met with his deserts, and himself been lost in the wood!"

She ran down a main path as she spoke. Desmond and Martin followed. Running suddenly to the left, Cicely came to a full stop, half turned to retrace her steps, and then stopped again as Gordon's voice, breaking upon the dead stillness of fairyland, arrested her.

"*Oh!*" she exclaimed.

Gordon and Margaret, hand in hand, and unabashed, were slowly walking up the path.

Desmond and Martin, too surprised to speak, stared with open eyes.

"Cicely," said Gordon, joyously, "come and be introduced to a lady who has promised to accept me as her *fiancé*."

"Oh, I *am* so glad!" cried Cicely. "I told you I should have to find you a nice wife, and Meg is one in a thousand."

With outstretched arms she ran forward, and, embracing Margaret in a delighted hug, kissed her enthusiastically.

"Thank you," whispered Margaret, simply.

"But, you see, I didn't wait for you to find her for me," replied Gordon.

"Oh, *didn't* you? Why, I saw it ages ago, and helped heaps and heaps, so that is all you know about it," answered Cicely. "I think men are the very stupidest things on earth, and as for uncles—well—there!"

"I congratulate you both, heartily," said Desmond, quietly. "I couldn't have wished you better luck, Meg." He laughed softly. "And I am sure you will make a most efficient aunt for a—er—certain young person."

"Pouf! I'll have two of them to look after now," cried Cicely.

The tea was quite cold when they again found themselves in the shelter, but nobody seemed to notice it. Cicely was full of a delightful patronage of her uncle and Margaret, and amused herself and them by giving hints regarding the public behaviour of an engaged couple.

It was dark by the time they reached the hotel. Mallory was impatiently kicking his heels in the hall

when they arrived. He said he had had a dull day, and was inclined to be grumpy. But nobody for the rest of that evening was allowed to be dull. Margaret was very quiet, but the others, insisting upon champagne—and plenty of it—to drink healths, grew exuberantly joyous.

Over late cigars that night Gordon talked to Desmond. He arranged that he would join their party, and that they should all return to England in a month's time. Margaret wished to be married at home, and, as far as Gordon was concerned, the less the delay the better pleased he would be.

"We will walk up Pedro to-morrow morning, purely because it is a pity to leave the country without doing so," said Gordon. "There will then be the race ball and the finals of the tennis to see this week. By Sunday half of the people will have left the place. On Monday I have arranged a two-days' trip to the Horton Plains. We'll have to ride there, as the motor is no use. I have borrowed a few horses here, and I'll send to the estate for any riding kit you may all want. It is a nineteen-mile ride there by a bridle path, and there is an excellent Rest House on the top, some thousand feet above this. The car will wait for us here. After that we must return to the estate, as I shall have a lot to do before I leave for England. I am a lucky man, old fellow!"

Desmond sighed lugubriously. "Yes. Although I am possibly prejudiced, I may say that I think you are," he replied. "I am very glad for her sake, all the same, although I dread to think what is to become of me when you are married, and I have to run my own show for myself."

"Oh, well," laughed Gordon, happily, "you must

look out for a wife yourself, that's all. Perhaps Cicely, who poses as the universal provider, may be able to help?"

Desmond, with an exaggeration of indifference, yawned and sauntered to the door. He made no answer, but Gordon, deeply abstracted with his own affairs, again failed to notice.

The journey to the top of Pedro mountain next morning was undertaken more as a duty than a pleasure. Every tourist, with sufficient strength of muscle and wind, is expected to climb the two-thousand feet which the top of Pedro adds to the elevation of Nuwera Eliya.

The morning, transcendently beautiful, proved to be well chosen. The winding footpath mounted ever upwards through jungle which, on either side, was absolutely impenetrable. The trees, more or less stunted, and moss-grown to an extent mostly seen in spectacular forests on the theatrical stage, thrust their gnarled branches above the scrub. Here and there an opening, cut by the Forest Department, enabled them to gain a wonderful view of the valley of Nuwera Eliya, hundreds of feet below.

Upon the top there was neither tree nor shrub. A cairn of stones, surmounted by a wooden staff, marked the highest point in Ceylon; and from this elevation they could, with field glasses, obtain a glimpse of the sea itself.

After the Pedro climb they were all quite content to idle away the afternoon watching the tennis. Their holiday was rapidly drawing to an end, and the days that remained could be counted with painful exactitude.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Not to be outdone by its predecessors, the day chosen for the ride to the Horton Plains broke clear and frostily. The flowers in the hotel garden were scintillating with dewy radiance as the sun shot across the tea hills. The sky was cloudless.

Martin had asked his golf friend of the fancy dress dance to join the party. Cicely and Margaret had met her several times since the ball, and expressed themselves delighted to have her. They had not, however, bargained for the presence of Mr. Barry, who was found, already mounted and waiting for them at the hotel door as they hurried from an early meal and came forth to inspect the horses.

Gordon at once collected the various native grooms, and sent them off across country, with the boxes containing changes of clothes upon their heads, so that when the party arrived at the Rest House there would be some clean clothes to meet them.

Both Margaret and Cicely looked exceptionally well in their riding habits. Few women look as well on a horse as on foot. Cicely's dark habit fitted her to perfection, and the white solar helmet upon her dark hair added a charm with which the conventional English felt hat could never have competed.

With one accord Mallory and Martin ran forward to help her mount, but, with an unexpected move-

ment, Desmond intervened, and, before the others had been given time to expostulate, he had deftly lifted her into the saddle.

It was a merry party that wound its way in double file down the Nanuoya Road. Half a mile ahead could be seen the string of grooms, running at a jog trot across country by short cuts where horses could not travel.

As the sun rose the air grew warmer, but still remained delightfully invigorating. Gordon and Margaret rode ahead. At Blackpool they left the main road, and led the way up a bridle path which for some miles could be seen winding its way through the open patnas.

Despite the joyousness of the morning, there was a tinge of melancholy in Cicely's heart. Every now and again she would be reminded by some trivial remark or incident that this was probably to be the very last jaunt they would all take together. Desmond rode at her elbow. He seemed to be studying her intently. He was very silent, but neither seemed to be embarrassed by the lack of conversation.

Their horses leisurely climbed the narrow road, and as an occasional level stretch came into view they would break into a trot. Presently, the railway came into sight. Crossing the track, they again left civilization, continuing their way by hill and dale until the Rest House at Pattipola came into view.

As they had been several hours on the road, it was agreed to halt there. In a few moments there were tables laden with the various liquid refreshments to be obtained, hurriedly brought forth into the open compound. The sun was getting hot, and several hours of the journey still remained to be completed.

From Pattipola onwards the road soon rose, almost precipitously. Then, from the open country, they entered dense jungle. In places, the gradient became so steep that the men dismounted and led their tired animals.

Mallory had been making strenuous attempts since leaving the Rest House to catch Cicely's attention. But for some reason best known to himself Desmond had grown strangely obtuse. No hints, however broad, from Mallory could dislodge him from his position as Cicely's escort. In a little while she dismounted also.

Slinging the bridles of both horses over his arm, Desmond walked by the girl's side up the steep path. The horses, carefully picking their way over the loose stones and projecting roots, followed in their wake.

The forest was alive with birds. The smell of the yellow *nillo* flowers permeated the air. Now and again a green lizard scuttled casually across the path, or a jungle fowl whirred noisily out of the scrub and disappeared into a tree top.

It was almost noon before the open plateau of the Horton Plains came into sight.

"Oh, here we are at last," cried Cicely. "And I am *so* hungry and thirsty. Who's for a race?"

A level stretch of more than a mile, free from trees, lay before them. The plateau, seven thousand feet above sea level, stretched out for miles of open patnas and clearings. The horses were tired, but, scenting rest and fodder, pricked up their ears and readily responded to a touch of the spur.

"Come along," responded Mallory, ramming his heels into his cob.

In another moment the whole cavalcade were scam-

pering across the plateau. Cicely sat her horse well, and had excellent hands. She had captured the start and kept it. Mallory, Desmond, and Martin thundered along, shouting and racing neck and neck, but the girl reached the entrance to the Rest House first, and dashed up the garden path.

The house was a long rambling building, with stables behind. The syces, having carefully selected a continuance of short cuts, had already arrived with the boxes.

The girls wasted no time in finding their rooms and washing away the dust of the road. The men found plenty of accommodation as well. One dormitory possessed no less than five beds, and there it was that Mallory, Barry, and Martin elected to camp out in company. The house was often patronised by elk hunters and fishermen, and was in consequence unusually large.

The luncheon was good, and, in any case, the appetites of the visitors were such that they were by no means inclined for captious criticism. No railway was nearer than six miles, and there was not even a cart road. All food had to be carried on coolies' heads. The mountain streams were well stocked with trout by a hill fishing club of which Gordon was a member.

The three occupants of the large dormitory were in hilarious spirits. If Mallory felt cause for depression he was certainly most effectually hustled out of it by the others. Martin, with the prospective dulness of Jaffna looming in the background, gave himself up to present joy. Gordon and Margaret were calmly happy.

Desmond still continued to be occupied with his

thoughts, but Cicely, with the remembrance in her mind of the painfully near approach of the end of her glorious Eastern holiday, let herself go, with an almost exaggerated air of gaiety.

In fact, that day the girl dared not pause to think. There was a sadness in the parting with this land which she had grown to love so well that, try as she would to avoid it, would persist in thrusting itself into her heart.

The glamour of the East had enveloped her with that magic mantle which, to some natures, is so extraordinarily difficult to throw off. At least, that was the cause assigned by herself to a recurring wave of melancholy, which, during the last few days, had persisted in thrusting itself upon her, even in what should have been her merriest moments.

After tiffin the girls retired to give themselves up to a *siesta*, and the men wandered off to the stables. About four o'clock they were all quite ready for tea. There was a large covered-in verandah, or porch, in front, furnished with comfortable chairs, where Margaret dispensed tea.

The *pièce de résistance* of the scenery of the "Hortons" was "The End of the World." A path of about half a mile in length led from the Rest House, first through open country, and then by a jungle opening, until it emerged upon a grass-grown cliff ending in an abysmal drop into nothingness—"the end of the world."

Reaching the spot, they threw themselves upon the grass. As far as the eye could reach could be seen the tea estates, rice fields, streams, and mountains of Uva, five thousand feet below.

The majesty of the hills, and the wonderful

panorama of the low-lands, were unspeakably impressive. The place was well named. It was indeed the end of the world.

Beneath the glow of gold and crimson and violet spreading over the distant hill-tops, they at length slowly sauntered back to the bungalow, drinking in the beauty of a scene most of them would probably never view again.

The large common-room of the bungalow, with its long table laid for dinner, and its great stone fireplace filled with blazing logs, looked particularly inviting.

The meal proved unusually hilarious. Barry and Mallory, bubbling with anecdote, kept things moving, and Gordon, who during the previous few days seemed to have dropped quite ten years of his age, urged them on to repeated effort.

After dinner the party gathered about the log fire, and Martin volunteered to tell a story. Then somebody called for a song with a chorus. Mallory, nothing loth, broke forth into a music-hall ditty which he had absorbed in Dublin. The chorus had an excellent swing to it, and presently the rafters shook sufficiently to please even Mallory himself.

An encore was demanded, and again Mallory, at the top of his lung-power, answered to the call, the song including another chorus.

Except for the light of the fire, the room was in darkness. Cicely, somewhat behind the others, with Desmond next to her, was sitting near the door leading to the porch.

Presently, during the chorus, Desmond glanced behind him into the shadows, then quietly leaned across to Cicely.

"Come out, and see the moon rising over Uva," he whispered softly.

For an instant the girl hesitated. To slip away from the fireside circle would be a particularly conspicuous action.

Looking quickly at Desmond's face, half-illumined by the firelight, her eyes dropped. There was something in his attitude, the tone of his voice as he asked her, the very fact that he had asked her at all, that drew her almost against her will. For the moment nobody but Desmond was looking her way. Again the chorus burst forth:—

"She had bells on her fingers and rings on her toes."

Without a word Cicely slipped softly through the door, and out into the moonlit porch.

"Come to the end of the garden," suggested Desmond at her elbow. "It is too shut-in to see the plains from here."

A peculiar sense of irresponsible obedience seemed to have suddenly possessed the girl. Glancing once more at Desmond's earnest face, she did not hesitate for an instant. Where at that moment he cared to lead, she would blindly follow. But there was a little nervous catch in her voice as she gave her answer.

"Do you think we ought to leave the others?" she asked, descending the steps.

"Yes—if only for this once—we *must*," he replied, taking her hand instinctively.

Down the broad path of the garden they sauntered to the gate. The moon, at its fullest brilliancy, flooded the place with almost the light of day. The air was on the verge of frost, but neither of them seemed to notice it.

"I have given Jack Mallory his chance," said Desmond bluntly, studying the girl's profile as she leaned against the gate, "and now I intend to take my own."

For a moment he stood waiting for her to move, but she made no sign.

"At one time it must have looked to you almost as if you were the Puritan maid, Priscilla, and I John Alden," he laughed. "But I am afraid I would never do for a John Alden. I have loved you for myself from the first. And never did I imagine you to be to me like Priscilla. I am asking a lot, Cicely —asking you to give your sweet joy of youth to a dull plodder." With a sudden movement he stood close to her, seizing her hands. "I dare say I am a fool. Am I?"

There was no trace of coquetry in her face as she met his question. All flippancy, so far as he was concerned, had long since left her. Within the depths of her eyes there had come a sudden light which no man had ever seen there before.

"I would have made a perfect Priscilla, had I been tempted," she whispered, with a half-stifled laugh.

"Cicely," he murmured hoarsely, "do you realise that it is for always?"

"Yes, for always and always," she sighed happily.

The next moment she was in his arms.

* * * * *

"Do you really and truly know what you are promising?" he cried presently, holding her at arms-length, and searching her blushing face. "Can you really mean it?"

"I seem to have always meant it," she answered quietly.

From across the garden there echoed through the stillness of the night the sound of a woman's voice singing a joyous love song.

"We must go in," whispered Cicely.

For answer, Desmond tenderly raised her face to his, and kissed her passionately.

For some moments neither spoke. Then, with a sudden return to her old habit of banter, Cicely chuckled.

"And do you still think that girls should not marry until they are twenty-five?" she whispered.

"H'm!"

"Do you?" she persisted.

"It depends on the girl, I think," he laughed, slipping his arm again about her lissom waist. "Some girls should marry at just about twenty-one."

"Oh! And flirt afterwards, then?" she inquired mischievously. "How, otherwise, is one to get in those delectable years of 'fling,' of which we have heard so much?"

"Well, sweetheart," he replied, "I do not see why we should not have it together, do you?"

Nestling her head confidingly against Desmond's shoulder, Cicely looked up into his face and sighed with happiness.

"That is what I have been longing for all the time," she said softly.

CONCLUSION.

FOR some time there was silence,—a silence which each seemed afraid to break in upon. Nature was hushed, the moonbeams strayed alluringly through the tree-tops, and, falling on the ferns and undergrowth, made the scene resemble fairyland. In the solemn stillness Cicely felt that peculiar thrill which is only experienced when one ventures for the first time upon the threshold of a new and unknown world. At length she said softly:

"Had we not better go in, Desmond? The others will be beginning to wonder."

Desmond turned, and, taking Cicely's hand, they retraced their steps. She wondered at his silence, and glanced up shyly into his face, but the words she was about to utter were left unsaid;—she saw—and was content.

As they entered the door of the bungalow the group sitting round the fire turned towards them.

"Come on, you truants!" shouted Mallory. "It's your turn for a song, Miss Rosmead, I—"

He broke off suddenly, and the words died on his lips, while all his boisterousness was gone like a flash. The others instinctively rose to their feet and gazed at them wonderingly.

Desmond appeared transformed, he seemed ten years younger, his figure was firm and erect, there

was a spring in his step, a gladness and light in his eyes which none had seen before. He stood holding Cicely's hand;—no words were needed, the unwonted flush on Cicely's cheeks, and her glad look of shy happiness told everything.

Margaret was the first to recover. "Oh! I am so glad!" she exclaimed as she sprang forward, and, putting her arms round Cicely, kissed her affectionately. Then, with womanly solicitude, she led her away into the shadows.

"Heartiest congratulations, old chap!" exclaimed Gordon, warmly seizing Desmond's hand. "I am more glad than I can say. You thoroughly deserve her!"

"Hanged if I'm going to congratulate you, Cleeve!" exclaimed Barry, shaking his fist at Desmond. "This means, I suppose, that for the future you're going to monopolise Miss Rosmead entirely?"

Gordon chuckled. "They're not married yet, Barry, so make what running you can while you have the chance!"

"Splendid!" exclaimed Barry. "But let's celebrate! Here!" he shouted, "Who's for drinks? Light the lamp, and let us celebrate the occasion! We must drink your healths and give you our blessing!"

Rushing away to the rear of the bungalow, Barry roused the rest-house keeper from his slumbers, and soon returned with a plentiful supply of bottles and glasses.

"Here, come on, all of you!" he shouted hilariously. "We don't get engaged every day! At least, I don't!"

Margaret and Cicely, with their arms entwined, emerged from a far corner, "But where is Mr. Mallory?" exclaimed Cicely.

They looked round—Mallory was gone.

Gordon and Desmond exchanged swift glances. "He's taking it badly, I fear," murmured the former.

Desmond nodded, "I'm sorry!—But Mallory is a good chap—he'll come round."

At that moment Mallory entered the room. His face was pale, but he smiled as he went up to Cicely.

"Please accept my warmest congratulations, Miss Rosmead," he exclaimed heartily. "Cleeve is the luckiest fellow in the world!"

"Thank you, Mr. Mallory."

There was a look in Cicely's eyes, an inflexion in her voice, which caused Mallory to turn away abruptly.

"Heartiest congratulations, Cleeve!" he exclaimed to Desmond. "I have been expecting it lately."

Desmond gripped his hand. "Thanks very much, Mallory," he said, quietly.

"Now then!" broke in Barry, as he handed round a tray of well-filled glasses. "Are you ready? Musical honours!" Jumping on to a chair, and beating time with his hand, he roared at the top of his voice, Gordon and Mallory joining in;—

"For he's a jolly good fellow,
And so say all of us!"

When the excitement had subsided, Gordon, looking unusually solemn, said: "Now, I am going to have an extra glass in order to congratulate myself."

"What about?" exclaimed Cicely.

Gordon looked at her with mischief in his eyes. "As Desmond has now been foolish enough to relieve

me of the grave responsibility which has rested on my shoulders ever since my niece landed in Ceylon, I must celebrate it. But"—shaking his head—"I feel sorry for Mr. Cleeve in having taken on such a handful permanently!"

A roar of laughter broke from Barry and Mallory, while Cicely waxed indignant.

"The cheek of uncles!" she exclaimed.

Margaret now interposed. "I think the best thing we can do is to get to bed. We have to start very early, you know."

"Good nights" were said, amid considerable chaff and banter, and then Margaret drew Cicely away.

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The next evening Gordon's car once more climbed the hill to his factory. Every journey now possessed an additional interest, for it was the last time before they sailed for England that they would view the scenes which were so indelibly impressed upon their memories. Declining an invitation to spend the remaining few days with them, Mallory had left for Colombo, with the intention of securing a passage to Japan. Gordon had a great deal of work to carry through in connection with his estate before he could be ready to sail, and the vast amount of detail kept him busily occupied.

But for Cicely and Desmond they were indeed golden days. Having no duties they were free to dream away the hours as they wished. The peace of the lovely green valleys, the calm reposeful majesty of the everlasting hills, the beauty of the glorious Ceylon sunsets, all found an echo in their own hearts, which responded readily to the glamour of their

elysian surroundings in those never-to-be-forgotten days, when the real world, with its troubles and difficulties, seemed very far away.

But all things come to an end, and it was with a feeling approaching sadness that one day Cicely watched a long string of coolies, their heads laden with trunks, filing down the path leading to the cart road.

Several hundred estate coolies stood massed a short distance away, ready to shout their respectful farewell to "master."

Cicely took a last long survey of the scene before her, and then turned with misty eyes to enter the waiting motor car. Desmond seemed to understand her feelings intuitively, and the drive to the station was accomplished in silence. Catching the morning train, they reached Colombo before dinner time, and drove to the Galle Face Hotel. On inquiry they learned that the P. & O. mail boat would not be leaving till the following afternoon.

As they entered the vestibule a hearty shout of welcome greeted them, and the next moment Jack Mallory, in immaculate new clothes and gorgeous socks, with a bunch of violets in his buttonhole, was shaking hands and talking nineteen to the dozen.

"Here you are at last!" he exclaimed. "I can't tell you how I have missed you all! This being your last night in Ceylon we are going to celebrate,—it is to be a gala night in honour of engaged couples! I have had a private dining-room reserved, and after dinner we shall have a dance. Now, Miss Rosmead, you won't forget me, will you? Right!" as Cicely smiled and nodded. "Barry is coming, also Martin, who is down, and several officers from Diyatalawa.

and the garrison here. It is to be no ordinary occasion, I can tell you!"

Mallory rattled on, scarcely giving them the opportunity of expressing their thanks, till Gordon exclaimed laughingly: "Well, you seem to have made all arrangements,—the only thing for us to do, apparently, is to fall in with them!"

"Absolutely nothing else to be done!" retorted Mallory.

Cicely and Margaret were in their gayest mood during dinner. Everybody seemed determined to enjoy themselves to the utmost, and in the general air of gaiety and hearty good-fellowship which prevailed, there was no room for vain regrets or sorrow at the morrow's parting.

Long before they had finished dinner the band had started to play in the great ball room. To lose such an opportunity was not to be thought of.

Many other ladies were present, but Margaret and Cicely were in great request, and found it impossible to give all the dances demanded of them. Catching Gordon and Desmond together, Martin, arm-in-arm with Barry, rushed up to them.

"This is our last chance!" he exclaimed. "As you are going to monopolise the two ladies after to-night, you must not expect any dances with them now!"

The two men laughed good-humouredly, and the fun became fast and furious. Supper was served at midnight, but it was past two o'clock before the last dance was finished.

Margaret and Cicely were in the highest spirits, and proved the centre of attraction, people thronged round them to say "Good-bye" and offer their con-

gratulations and good wishes. The thorough heartiness and sincerity of the warm invitations to visit Ceylon again touched Cicely, Margaret, and Desmond, and the farewells proved more trying than they had anticipated.

"Here!" suddenly exclaimed Mallory. "Last round! Join hands! 'Auld Lang Syne'!"

The whole company joined hands, and a mighty shout went up, which woke many guests sleeping in the hotel, and caused the night watchman in the portico outside to run up the steps to see what was wrong.

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In the soft light of evening, four people stood at the taffrail of the great English mail boat, which, with engines at full speed, was surging swiftly through the waters of the Indian Ocean in the direction of the setting sun. In the dim distance there could still be discerned the long line of sandy beach, girt with its waving cocoa-nut palms, the curling breakers beating upon the coast line, which extended as far as the eye could reach, and the fishing catamarans returning homewards for the night. With full hearts the little party watched in silence the fast-retreating shore, and as it became more and more indistinct, they unconsciously raised their eyes to the tops of the hills on which the golden light still rested.

"Look" exclaimed Margaret, "at the beautiful clouds hovering about the top of that mountain! The violet, merging through mauve and crimson into gold, is magnificent."

"Ah!" replied Gordon, raising his glasses, "That is just over Adam's Peak, and almost beneath its shadow lies my estate."

The sun had already touched the water-line. They watched in silence the clouds change rapidly, the beautiful colours became purple tinged with gold, then the purple dissolved into a dull grey mass as the last rays disappeared. Cicely shivered slightly and nestled closer to Desmond. Together they watched the "land of enchantment" fade into mist, and as the stars peeped out faintly above them in the pale sky Cicely's eyes were suffused with tears of happiness as she reflected on the love and wondrous joy which that momentous visit had brought her. As she turned to the West, her thoughts instinctively occupied themselves in anticipating the future, and a shy, but great gladness thrilled her at the picture of herself as Desmond's wife. Desmond seemed to divine her thoughts, for he stooped and kissed her reverently.

Cicely raised her head and smiled. In the depths of her blue eyes there was an expression which comes but twice in a life-time:—at the dawn of that great world love, and again when, at the bidding of the Angel of Death, love bids farewell to love.

THE END.

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